

1 **Conceptualising examinable physical education in the Irish context: Leaving**
2 **Certificate Physical Education**

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6

7 Dylan Scanlon's research interests include (physical education) curriculum and assessment,
8 examinable physical education, and sociology.

9

10 Professor Ann MacPhail's research interests revolve around (physical education) teacher
11 education, young people in sport, curriculum development in physical education, teaching,
12 learning and assessment issues within school physical education, methodological issues in
13 working with young people and ethnography.

14

15 Antonio Calderon's research interests revolve around student learning in physical education
16 and on social media and digital technologies for learning and engagement in teacher education.

17

18 **Conceptualising examinable physical education in the Irish context: Leaving Certificate**

19 **Physical Education**

20 A Physical Education Development Group (PEDG) were responsible for
21 constructing a new school subject curriculum, Leaving Certificate Physical
22 Education (LCPE), in Ireland. This paper provides an insight into this
23 development group and explores the process of curriculum development, and the
24 influence of roles and power-ratios within the group, in the construction of the
25 LCPE curriculum. Figural sociology concepts (Elias, 1978; 1994) were
26 drawn on to make sense of the curriculum makers' experiences. Interviews were
27 conducted with ten PEDG members. The findings suggest that the members' roles
28 had very little, if any, influence on the curriculum development process. Findings
29 also revolved around the unbalanced power ratios which existed in the PEDG and
30 highlighted the socially powerful position of 'strong, well-established' (in the
31 academic field of curriculum development - participant's words) members and
32 the other members (predominantly representing practicing teachers). We express
33 concern for the role of teachers in the curriculum process and argue that they play
34 a crucial and significant role in the school subject curriculum development
35 process. This paper supports Goodson's (1983) and Penney's (2006)
36 conceptualisation of the contested and socially constructed nature of the
37 curriculum development process.

38

39 **Keywords:** examinable physical education; leaving certificate physical
40 education; figural sociology; curriculum development

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46 **Introduction**

47 School subjects are developed over a long-term process by sub-groups and are influenced by
48 social processes (both past and present) (Goodson & Marsh, 1996). As such, they can be
49 classified as social constructs (Goodson, 1983). School subjects, or the ‘subject community’,
50 entail a network of people who can have different views on what the subject should look like,
51 i.e., the prioritised knowledge within a subject (Goodson & Marsh, 1996). This level of
52 contestation is considered essential for curriculum development (Goodson, 1983). This
53 curriculum development process, and the associated high level of contestation, recently
54 occurred in Ireland with regards to the construction of an examinable physical education
55 curriculum, Leaving Certificate Physical Education (LCPE).

56 There has been an increased international interest in the development of examinable
57 physical education (Brown & Penney, 2018) and particularly in Ireland, the most recent
58 country to commit to enacting examinable physical education, LCPE. This paper will focus on
59 the introduction of LCPE, an optional high-stakes examinable physical education subject in the
60 final two years of post-primary schools which was introduced to Irish post-primary schools in
61 September 2018. While the LCPE curriculum is a result of a number of interrelated political
62 and social processes (Penney, 2006), the curriculum specification was constructed over two
63 decades by a Physical Education Development Group (PEDG). This group was made up of a
64 number of curriculum makers representing national agencies (representative roles). Despite the
65 significant role curriculum makers play in the curriculum development process, the process in
66 which these curriculum makers undertake in constructing curriculum specifications is rarely
67 empirically investigated (Hart, 2002). As such, and in a similar vein in presenting curriculum
68 makers’ experiences of curriculum development (Chisholm, 2005; Hart, 2002; MacPhail,
69 2015; You, 2011), this provides an insight into the development group responsible for the
70 construction of the LCPE curriculum in Ireland.

71 This paper aims to explore the process of curriculum development in Ireland and to
72 understand how the influence of roles and relationships within the PEDG (and the ongoing
73 social processes, for example, curriculum reform at post-primary level) assisted in constructing
74 and shaping such a curriculum. Following this overall aim, we outline two research questions;

75 (i) What influence did PEDG members' representative roles (members
76 representing national nominating agencies) have on their level of engagement in the
77 curriculum development process?;

78 (ii) What power-ratios existed within this group? And to what extent did these
79 enhance or limit engagement in the curriculum development process?;

80 We begin by introducing the sensitising concepts used in this paper before defining
81 'examinable physical education' and outlining the LCPE specification and the PEDG.

82

83 **Figurational concepts as sensitising concepts**

84 Concepts from figurational sociology, which emanate from the work of Norbert Elias, were
85 used as sensitising concepts when creating the interview schedule, analysing the data and
86 theorising the data (Charmaz, 2014). The three sensitising concepts used from figurational
87 sociology were figurations, power and involvement/detachment. These concepts were treated
88 "as start-points rather than end-points" (Wheeler, 2013, p.72) and as such, these were drawn
89 on in the analysing process to best explain the constructed data. Given that curriculum
90 development is inevitably connected with the past and present, and is a product of social
91 construction, this paper embraces the process-orientated (figurational) approach.

92 Firstly, a figuration consists of complex network of interdependent people which is
93 constantly in flux (Elias, 1978) or in other words, 'a structure of mutually orientated and

94 dependent people' (Bloyce & Smith, 2010, p.4) which is regularly shifting involving social
95 processes. It is argued that people can only be understood within their networks of social
96 relationships, i.e., their figurations (Green, 2002; van Krieken, 1998). It is important to note
97 that these networks are not solely 'face-to-face' relationships but are networks (or figurations)
98 which consist of ties of interdependent people inclusive of social processes – past or present,
99 recognised or unrecognised (Green, 2002). The PEDG members involved in this study were
100 situated in a complex network of relationships including their involvement in the PEDG, their
101 professional lives, their roles in (and external to) the PEDG and the (relatively small) physical
102 education community in Ireland. The concept of figuration can be used to explore these
103 relationships and the interaction between the PEDG members.

104 Secondly, power, a central element to figurations, can be conceptualised as 'a structural
105 characteristic...of all human relationships' (Elias, 1978, p.74). Power should not be viewed as
106 something static but rather a characteristic of a relationship which has the potential to place
107 people in a powerful position. It is worth noting that power-ratios are unbalanced (Maher,
108 2010) and 'therefore relationship within figurations are seen as both enabling and constraining
109 depending on the location of power' (Keay, 2009, p.231). This conceptualisation of power can
110 be used to explore the power differentials in the PEDG and to understand the members' actions
111 (or lack of) in the deliberations.

112 Thirdly, Elias's concept of involvement/detachment. Elias (1978) claims that to
113 efficiently understand an adequate representation of the social processes being studied,
114 researchers (as human beings) needed to recognise that they are a part of the social process (the
115 study) and as such, are emotionally attached to the study (Perry, Thurston, & Green, 2004; van
116 Krieken, 1998). This emotional orientation - involvement - puts the development of the
117 objective knowledge of the study at risk as 'it lessens the likelihood of researchers' being able
118 to bring their critical intellectual faculties under control' (Perry et al., 2004, p.137). By

119 attempting to detach oneself from the study by ‘exercising greater emotional control of
120 ideological preferences’ (Perry et al., 2004), researchers may best be able to gain an ‘objective,
121 scientific perspective’ (Elias, 1978; van Krieken, 1998). These concepts will help us to
122 understand how the influence of roles and relationships in (and external to) the PEDG, and the
123 connected social processes, shaped the LCPE curriculum. We now briefly outline the LCPE
124 specification before discussing the PEDG who constructed and shaped the specification.

125

126 *The Leaving Certificate Physical Education specification*

127 LPCE is an optional subject chosen by students who want to study it for their final schooling
128 examinations, i.e., the Leaving Certificate examinations. The results of this subject, alongside
129 the other chosen Leaving Certificate subjects, are accumulated for entry to further and higher
130 education. The two-year Leaving Certificate subjects are chosen in Senior Cycle when students
131 are aged 16-18 years old. The LCPE curriculum aims to ‘develop the learner’s capacity to
132 become an informed, skilled, self-directed and reflective performer in physical activity in
133 senior cycle and in their future life’ (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
134 (NCCA), 2017, p.7). The specification revolves around two elements, theoretical and practical,
135 but it is emphasised that these elements operate together in an integrative relationship, “learners
136 experience physical education as a concurrent process of learning in, through and about
137 physical activity” (NCCA, 2017, p.8). These elements are assessed through three components,
138 a Physical Activity Project (worth 20%), a performance assessment (worth 30%) and a written
139 examination (worth 50%). A PEDG were responsible for the construction of this specification.
140 We will now outline the make-up of this group and discuss its role in the curriculum
141 development process.

142

143 *Physical Education Development Group*

144 The NCCA are an advisory body who communicate with the Irish Minister for Education and
145 Skills on curriculum and assessment, who operate with a number of educational partners and
146 are responsible for constructing all school subjects' curricula. In doing so, the NCCA establish
147 subject development groups who play a central role in constructing subject curriculum and
148 assessment documentation. These development groups consist of professionals who are
149 nominated from a list of relevant agencies the NCCA has compiled for all subject development
150 groups.

151 The PEDG were given responsibility for finalising the LCPE curriculum
152 documentation. The PEDG was guided by an Education Officer who reported activity and
153 developments to the NCCA executives, and was supported in the writing of the curriculum by
154 a seconded teacher and teacher educator hired for this purpose. The members of the PEDG
155 were not directly involved in writing the LCPE curriculum but directed its content and
156 associated assessments. The nominating agencies represented by the PEDG members are listed
157 in Table 1. These nominating agencies are national agencies who, on request from the NCCA,
158 propose an individual who represents the nominating agencies at the PEDG meetings.
159 Understandably, given the LCPE PEDG operated from 1998 to 2015, and the voluntary nature
160 of the development group, the PEDG members changed over the years but the nominating
161 agencies remained the same. While LCPE was formally announced in 1998, contextual issues
162 surrounding policy and economic factors prevented its progression until more recently (2013).
163 Interestingly, the LCPE specification was constructed alongside the Senior Cycle Physical
164 Education Framework by the same PEDG (MacPhail, 2015). In exploring the operations of the
165 same committee in the construction of the Senior Cycle Physical Education (SCPE)
166 Framework, MacPhail (2015) prompts us to consider the impact that roles and relationships

167 played in the construction of the Framework. On this suggestion, this paper builds on
168 MacPhail's (2015) findings, which will be revisited in the findings and discussion section.

169

170 *Table 1: The Physical Education Development Group*

171 *[Insert Table 1 here]*

172 We will now explore the international examinable physical education context to provide a
173 background to the developments in Ireland.

174

175 **The examinable physical education context**

176 As established, by examinable physical education, we mean physical education as a
177 summatively assessed school subject in a high-stakes environment. Previous research (Carroll,
178 1998; Green, 2001; MacPhail, O'Sullivan & Halbert, 2008; Reid, 1998) highlights the 'black
179 sheep' (Casey & O'Donovan, 2015) label that physical education wears among its mainstream
180 counterparts, i.e., the traditional subjects from an academic tradition (Goodson, 1983).

181 In Ireland, physical education's 'low' status is epitomised in the decision not to make
182 physical education a mandatory subject at senior level (final two years of compulsory
183 schooling) and, as such, its inclusion in mainstream education at senior cycle is up to the
184 discretion of the individual school management. The low status associated with physical
185 education in Ireland has left teachers with 'feelings of dissatisfaction or limited fulfilment in
186 teaching physical education... [partly due to] the lack of formal accountability for those
187 involved in teaching physical education' (Iannucci & MacPhail, 2017, p.11). This situation
188 resides in a wider social process, the professionalization of physical education (Green, 2008).
189 This process – the 'quest for legitimacy' (Casey & O'Donovan, 2015, p.349) - emanates from

190 physical education teachers' (and academics') deep-rooted concerns regarding the academic
191 credentials of their subject (Green, 2008) or in other words, the 'quest for legitimacy' (Casey
192 & O'Donovan 2015, p.349). This long-term process arguably continues despite the
193 introduction of examinable physical education curricula, as there appears to be a constant
194 comparison to other subjects of an academic tradition, which closely align with written
195 examinations based on a theoretical platform, and thus hold a 'high' status (Green, 2008;
196 Goodson, 1983). The context for examinable physical education in Ireland was also shaped at
197 the political level. The Government, and particularly the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) has
198 positively advocated for health-related initiatives, aligning its commitments with the Healthy
199 Ireland Framework (a framework which aims to improve the country's health and wellbeing)
200 and the National Physical Activity Plan. As such, the Government supported the introduction
201 of Leaving Certificate Physical Education ('A Programme for Partnership', 2016). We now
202 move on to discuss the methods used in this study.

203

204 **Methodology**

205 This study was conducted in a qualitative manner and a case study design was adopted which
206 enabled a deeper exploration into the particular context (or figuration) (Bryman, 2012). This
207 approach and the associated data collection methods associated aligns with a process-orientated
208 methodology (Baur & Ernst, 2011; Thurston, 2019).

209

210 ***Sampling and participants***

211 Ethics approval was granted from the authors' institute. Members, contacted through
212 email, were purposively sampled (Bryman, 2012) and resulted in seven PEDG members, who
213 represented seven nominating agencies or were co-opted, and three NCCA stakeholders,

214 agreeing to take part. Given the physical education community in Ireland is relatively small
215 and that sensitive data may be traceable, no further information will be provided on the sample
216 group. Pseudonyms are given to participants when reporting data. As stated, while the PEDG
217 has been in operation from 1998, the PEDG individuals interviewed here were members of the
218 2013 - 2015 group. From the participants interviewed, it is noted that one participant was in
219 the PEDG since 1998, one since 2006 and another since 2009. The remaining participants
220 joined the PEDG in 2013. With regards to the three NCCA stakeholders, one participant was
221 in the PEDG since 1998 (although not as a NCCA representative), one since 2011 and the other
222 since 2013.

223

224 *Interviews and data analysis*

225 The interviews followed a semi-structured format as it allowed the researcher to have a number
226 of prepared questions and the freedom to explore in-depth specific answers (Bryman, 2012).
227 Interviews were transcribed and returned to the members for their consideration and edits (three
228 members returned edited transcripts). Data analysis occurred in a combined inductive and
229 deductive manner. Figurational concepts were used as sensitising concepts (deductive) but
230 were not used in the data analysis process until the last phase of coding (inductive). This
231 allowed further concepts to be used if they best explained the constructed data (Charmaz,
232 2014). The coding process occurred in three phases; initial, focused and theoretical and
233 examples of each are provided in Table 2. The double-ended arrows highlight that a process
234 occurs between the phases and that each phase is not a separate entity (Thornberg & Charmaz,
235 2012).

236 The first phase of coding began with initial coding which included line-by-line coding
237 and incident-to-incident coding (Charmaz, 2014). This combination approach allowed the

238 exposure of ‘implicit concerns as well as explicit statements’ (Mordal-Moen & Green, 2014,
239 p.418). The codes represented phrases used by the members or words describing the particular
240 data to reduce author interpretation. In the second phase of coding, categories and
241 subcategories were constructed. It was important to compare the initial codes and the
242 categories, and review through constant comparison in a more selective and conceptual manner
243 (Weed, 2009). In the final phase of coding, theoretical connections and relationships were made
244 between the underpinning theory and the constructed categories (Charmaz, 2014). Elias’s work
245 on the sensitising concepts and literature which used the sensitising concepts was read and
246 analysed. The constructed focused codes and the raw data associated with these codes were
247 read and re-read. This allowed the author to become familiar with how, and in what manner,
248 theoretical connections could be made to best explain the constructed focused codes. Memo
249 writing (Charmaz, 2014) proved useful in this process of building theoretical relationships
250 between the data and the sensitising concepts. From the sensitising concepts chosen ,
251 figurations and power proved most useful in explaining the constructed data. The concept of
252 figurations allowed us to understand the complexity of the PEDG (and associated social
253 processes) and the impact it had on the (unintended) outcome of the curriculum development
254 process. The concept of power shed light on how certain members were in a powerful position
255 and how that effected the engagement of other members. It also highlighted the power-ratios
256 which existed in the PEDG (figuration). During the final phase of coding (theoretical coding),
257 the concept of involvement/detachment was drawn on when analysing why members
258 proceeded in representing their own views and (in most cases) not the views of their nominating
259 agency. Three categories were a result of the coding process. The first author collected and
260 analysed the data. Regular meetings occurred between the three authors to clarify, agree and
261 disagree, and come to a consensus on the constructed categories.

262

263 *Table 2: Examples of codes during the three phased coding process (Charmaz, 2014)*
264

265 [Insert Table 2 here]

266

267 The following is presented by highlighting the findings under each category followed
268 by discussion of such category findings. This approach allows us to further explore the process
269 of curriculum development in Ireland and to understand how the influence of roles and
270 relationships within the PEDG (and the ongoing social processes) assisted in constructing and
271 shaping such a curriculum.

272

273 **Findings and discussion**

274 **The influence (or not) of PEDG members' representative roles**

275 This category closely aligns with the first research question, what influence did PEDG
276 members' representative roles have on their level of engagement in the curriculum
277 development process?

278 The members' responses regarding their representative role were confusing in nature
279 and at times, contradictory. While all but one member were able to recall which agency they
280 were representing on the PEDG, they appeared to be unsure about what their representative
281 role entailed. Few nominating agencies provided representatives with guidelines. Regardless,
282 there appeared to be little enforcement of such guidelines:

283 You were given guidelines from [nominating agency] but when you're in that kind of
284 committee structure, they don't necessarily apply (Kate)

285 One member was not certain of who they were representing, assuming they were representing
286 an agency which they were not: 'I just presumed I was brought on board as the representative
287 from [nominating agency]...so that's how I dealt with it anyway' (Jade). Another member
288 perceived to be representing two nominating agencies: 'The [nominating agency] would be
289 supported on what the [another nominating agency] were doing so, you know, it was okay to
290 talk from two perspectives' (Claire).

291 This lack of clear representation or guidance from the nominating agencies on their
292 expected role as well as the NCCA resulted in some members lack of confidence in their role
293 and led to role frustration for others (as they were unsure of their level of contribution):

294 Starting off I was nervous going into those groups, you know, feeling like you're out
295 of your depth and feeling about like "What the hell am I doing here" (Kate)

296 I suppose I attended the meetings and I gave feedback on any decisions [that] were
297 brought to the table but that would have been the extent of it like, you know, it was
298 designed, packaged and ready to roll by the time it reached us (Brendan)

299 This was somewhat in contrast to the teaching union representatives' role where aligned
300 members had specific guidelines on what their role was with opportunities to feedback:

301 If there were issues coming up, I would flag them with the [Union] and ensure we were
302 on track...

303 Well I just think you have to be cognizant of the other because remember I'm a
304 [Teaching Union] person because I'm a physical educator, you know, and because I
305 was presenting the ideas of my union...I couldn't have said yes to stuff that I thought
306 would have been unacceptable to my union (Chloe)

307 Given that the members attended PEDG meetings representing their nominating agency and,
308 would have been expected to engage in deliberations reflecting the views of that nominating
309 agency, this did not appear to be the case. The members identified more with representing their
310 own views and beliefs: ‘I do think everybody was there with their own interests in
311 mind...everybody is there wearing their own hat’ (Brendan). One member confirms:

312 Essentially they represent themselves. They come and they represent their own thoughts
313 or feeling and attitudes and that’s fine. It will obviously be coloured from the
314 organisations that they come from. There is probably slight difference when they’re
315 coming from a teacher union background, you know, it can be more nuanced, you
316 know, to reflect union policy and often then it mightn’t be – that depends on the person
317 you have (Emmet)

318 We can only explore the PEDG members within their networks of social relationships,
319 i.e., their figurations (Green, 2002; van Krieken, 1998). While the PEDG represents a ‘face-to-
320 face’ figuration, it is important to remember that each member is a part of their own figurations
321 which includes past and present networks of interdependent people (Green, 2002). As such, we
322 can get a snapshot of how complex the PEDG members’ figurations are, given their ties with
323 the PEDG, their professional lives, their roles in (and external to) the PEDG and their
324 connection to the physical education community in Ireland. The influence (or not) of the
325 members’ roles within their figurations was a central aim of this study. In a previous study
326 exploring an earlier configuration of the PEDG’s deliberations on SCPE, MacPhail (2015)
327 found that ‘individuals identified more with representing their own views than being confined
328 to the rhetoric of, or considering possible ramifications to, the agencies they were representing’
329 (p.232). The findings reported from this study provide evidence that the PEDG maintained the
330 same perspective when considering LCPE deliberations.

331 The concept of involvement and detachment can be applied to the PEDG context, in
332 that, all members had links or direct connections to the physical education subject community,
333 by being, or previously being, a teacher, involved in teacher education and/or a member of the
334 subject professional association. They subsequently display a high level of emotional
335 orientation towards physical education as a subject. It is imperative that we highlight the
336 importance of human emotion (Elias, 1978) in this study given the PEDG members' high level
337 of emotional involvement in the curriculum development process and physical education in
338 general. This emotional involvement and the influential social processes occurring somewhat
339 coloured the PEDG members' engagement in the deliberations by expressing their own
340 ideologies (reflections of their high level of involvement in the subject and the wider social
341 processes) and not that of their nominating agency, as we will now argue.

342 MacPhail (2015) notes the group's lack of accountability to their nominating agencies
343 as a form of encouragement for the level of autonomy displayed by the members. Whilst this
344 was also true in this study, we further argue that each members' high level of involvement in
345 the physical education subject area and their personal and professionally driven biographies
346 (*habitus*) prevailed in the conversations and tended to encourage expression of their own views
347 and beliefs rather than that of their nominating agency. In other words, even if a particular
348 member's role prevented them from engaging in a conversation in which they were emotionally
349 attached, their ideologies (which are so deeply habituated) controlled their level of engagement.
350 This was particularly obvious in the conversations around assessment (please see Scanlon,
351 MacPhail & Calderon, 2019). Alluding to the concept of *habitus*, the PEDG members' agency
352 to engage tends to be influenced by their deeply ingrained predispositions (Camic, 1986;
353 Mordal-Moen & Green, 2014). Therefore, if we acknowledge the concepts of *habitus*, and
354 involvement and detachment, it is fair to argue that PEDG members' roles have very little, if
355 any, influence on the curriculum development process. Furthermore, there was minimal, if any,

356 guidance or support from the nominating agencies, which further distanced the relationship
357 between the PEDG members and their nominating agencies.

358 This high level of involvement in the physical education subject area, and subsequent
359 impact on the contribution of the members' roles, was recognised by one of the members
360 (Emmet) who observed and confirmed that members were there to represent their own
361 ideologies (formed from their emotional attachment to the subject area) and therefore, put the
362 development of objective knowledge at risk (Perry, Thurston & Green, 2004; van Krieken,
363 1998). As Emmet also points out, this argument does not necessarily apply to the teaching
364 union representatives' roles as they were constrained by their roles in upholding the policies of
365 their respective union. Both teaching union representatives acknowledged, on a number of
366 occasions, their philosophies aligning with that of their unions. This leads us to consider that,
367 if these individuals were in the PEDG as 'co-opted' individuals, would they have reacted and
368 contributed in a similar way to the curriculum development process as they had when
369 representing their respective teaching unions. It is fair to argue that the members' ideologies
370 (Elias, 1978), constructed by their habitus and shaped by their high level of involvement,
371 appeared to have more of an influence on the LCPE deliberations than their represented roles.
372 This arguably led to some members becoming frustrated due to the confusion over their role
373 and associated level of expected contribution to the deliberations. Some members were unsure
374 of the remit of their role and were left questioning 'what the hell am I doing here?'.
375

376 **The powerful position of the 'strong, well-established' PEDG members**

377 The second research question informs this category, what power-ratios existed within
378 this group? And to what extent did these power ratios enhance or limit engagement in the
379 curriculum development process?. There was a common thread throughout the interviews of

380 the powerful position of ‘strong, well-established’ (in the academic field of curriculum
381 development - participant’s words) PEDG members in the LCPE deliberations. Their
382 biographies, and their knowledge and expertise in the physical education and curriculum
383 development area, positioned these individuals in a powerful space which enabled them to
384 contribute at a higher level than other members. This caused frustrations among other
385 members:

386 [Discussing member’s background] Of course you are going to listen to [them]. Was
387 there times maybe that people probably found that frustrating? I would say yes...but
388 [they] had such a sharp mind and [they are] so good at putting things together like even
389 just debates on words, you know, it might eventually come back and that would always
390 be [name]’s word that’s chosen but I think maybe [some] struggled with that sometimes
391 (Kate)

392 Regardless, the organisation of the PEDG did not prevent individuals from ‘speaking up’.
393 Rather, it was the powerful position of these ‘strong, well-established’ individuals (given their
394 knowledge and expertise in the physical education and curriculum development area), and the
395 intimidation ‘factor’ associated with such a position, which discouraged others from
396 contributing:

397 [In] the first few meetings, you were a bit nervous...and you don’t want to seem like
398 an idiot so you’re careful about what you say and, you know, you’re kind of like what
399 I said that we are deferential...you just listen to the experts...

400 Look you have [the] dominant voices around a table that...have a background to enable
401 themselves to be heard but it wasn’t ever...a point where you thought “Oh I am getting
402 shouted down here” – well maybe there were one or two instances – but not in a

403 way...that wanted me to get out of the room or not feel like I could speak up another
404 time (Kate)

405 From this frustration, groups emerged in the form of ‘teacher voice’ (which represented the
406 practicing teachers) versus ‘strong, well established voice’ (which represented, in most cases,
407 members with strong academic credentials): ‘You could see that the three universities being
408 well represented and sometimes quite a strong voice, and that’s why it’s quite important that
409 as PE teachers, we were a strong voice too’ (Claire). By differentiating the ‘strong, well-
410 established’ members and the other members, we can get a better picture of the unbalanced
411 power ratios which existed in this group which will be explored in the following discussion.

412 As alluded to above, the ‘strong, well-established’ members were in a powerful position
413 in the PEDG due to their expertise and knowledge in the area. They therefore had the ability to
414 articulate and contribute to the deliberations at a greater extent, resulting in the ‘other’ members
415 becoming frustrated with the process. By conceptualising power as a constantly in flux
416 characteristic of a relationship (Elias, 1978), and a central element of a figuration, we can better
417 understand why this occurred. Unbalanced power-ratios existed in the PEDG (figuration) and
418 these power-struggles constrained the ‘other’ members in contributing to the deliberations due
419 to the location of power (Elias, 1978; Keay, 2009; Maher, 2010). We are not suggesting that
420 these members did not have the opportunity to engage in the conversation as they explicitly
421 commented that they did due to the inclusive nature of the chair of the group. Rather, the
422 location of power discouraged these members not to share specific thoughts in fear ‘of looking
423 like an idiot’. This does not indicate that these members were ‘powerless’. They possessed a
424 level power in that they could contribute to the discussions but a level of confidence was
425 required to challenge the ‘strong, well-established’ members. Kate’s stance in the final two
426 quotes is strong in re-emphasising this point and highlights the unbalanced power-ratios
427 which exist in the figuration (PEDG).

428 Interestingly, Hart (2002), when discussing curriculum development for school
429 physics, alludes to a similar situation to what occurred in the PEDG whereby the “academic
430 physicists represented a ‘dominant group’” (p.1057). Throughout the PEDG deliberations, the
431 teachers were not demanding or advocating for anything different from the strong, well
432 established members but they felt that the conversations were dominated by this strong, well
433 established voice. This power struggle between ‘teacher voice’ and ‘strong, well established
434 voice’ was most evident in the conversations around assessment (please see Scanlon, MacPhail
435 & Calderon, 2019). While teachers are considered to have an essential role to play in the
436 curriculum development process (Ben-Peretz, 1980), it is well noted that they encounter
437 problems in the process related to ‘the knowledge and skills needed to enact collaborative
438 design process’ (Huizinga, Handelzalts, Nieveen & Voogt, 2014, p.33). This was evident in
439 the LCPE deliberations and an unintended consequence which arose due to this was the
440 formation of splinter groups with the ‘strong, well-established’ members on one side and (in
441 most cases) practicing teachers on the other side. This was particularly noticeable in the
442 discussions on assessment (Scanlon, MacPhail & Calderon, 2019). In discussing the results
443 under this category, the concept of power was clearly evident through what participants’ quotes
444 were shared with respect to how the location of power can put people in powerful positions,
445 resulting in unbalanced power-ratios and the unintended consequences which emerge from
446 such power differentials (Elias, 1978; Keay, 2009; Maher, 2010).

447

448 **Pressure to ‘get it over the line’: the influence of political and social processes in the LCPE**
449 **development**

450 The third category focuses on the social processes which were embedded and evident
451 when exploring the first two research questions. There appeared to be a sense of urgency or

452 'pressure' in the latter end of the LCPE development process as almost all referred to 'get[ting]
453 it over the line':

454 The decisions that had to be made was "do we really just pull the trigger now and try
455 to move it while the context is very positive and pro-physical education" or "do we try
456 to get it totally right and then the political context might have shifted" so that's what I
457 think we all meant...by getting it over the line...

458 The intensity of the meetings towards the end were driven as much by the context
459 outside the NCCA and within the NCCA in terms of "This is a window [of opportunity],
460 you better use this window" (Evan)

461 The importance of the political processes emphasised the significance of Government
462 individuals in the 'window' the political process provided:

463 While the NCCA had passed the specification, the implementation came hugely from
464 because the Taoiseach [Irish Prime Minister] wanted it and Richard Bruton [Minister
465 of Education and Skills] knew it. That's what happened...

466 We will never be able to underestimate how important this moment has been. The
467 context gave the window – [which] we may not get back again (Emmet)

468 In terms of social processes, Junior Cycle reform (which influenced school physical education)
469 was occurring at the same time and the PEDG were also involved in that development, in
470 particular, the development of the Physical Education Junior Cycle Short Course:

471 I think there was a tension as well that came with the Junior Cycle Short Course so
472 there's all kinds of shit going on out there about that and...that definitely did create a
473 sour taste, you know, in that we were fighting those fires on one side and having those

474 conversations...we had a lot of contention in the PE world about it and that definitely
475 was colouring the [Leaving Certificate] PE conversations (Emmet)

476 The extent to which that [Short Course discussions] flowed over in the discussions
477 around Senior Cycle [LCPE], it's hard to know...I think what the [NCCA] saw to do
478 was to put a distance between the two processes...I certainly know that some people
479 came to the group and were reluctant to let that go...in the case of people bringing
480 baggage from the Short Course to the Senior Cycle [LCPE] stuff, I'm sure they did. I
481 think having sat in on a few of those meetings, it was difficult enough at times (Joey)

482

483 Brown and Penney (2018) highlight that 'with respect to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment,
484 each country must consider conceptual and curriculum coherence issues' (p. 11) within and
485 about examinable physical education. As such, this paper aimed to understand the
486 conceptualisation of examinable physical education in the Irish context by examining the social
487 processes which directly (and indirectly) influenced the development of the LCPE curriculum.
488 It is argued (Goodson, 1985; Young, 1971) that the socially constructed nature of subjects is
489 politically driven. This was very much the case with regards to the LCPE curriculum
490 development process. It appears that the political processes drove the curriculum development
491 process whereas the social processes (i.e., teaching union ideologies and Junior Cycle reform
492 processes) somewhat 'slowed down' this process. It is important to remember that social
493 processes are inevitably interconnected to figurations (Green, 2002). As acknowledged in the
494 findings, the Government, and in particular, the Taoiseach [Irish Prime Minister] Leo
495 Varadkar, had a significant influence in providing a 'window' for the PEDG. This was
496 emphasised by the NCCA and created a sense of urgency in the PEDG meetings. This political
497 process directly influenced the direction of the curriculum development and resulted in

498 unintended consequences. One such unintended consequence was the LCPE assessment
499 guidelines being devised after the construction of the curriculum rather than in parallel with
500 the curriculum.

501 Interlinked with the social process was the Junior Cycle reform process. Centre to
502 Junior Cycle reform was the changes in assessment approaches at Junior Cycle level (NCCA,
503 2015). This PEDG were involved in the Junior Cycle reform deliberations and the tensions
504 associated to that reform, specifically the Short Course developments, appeared to overflow
505 into, and colour individuals' contribution to, the LCPE deliberations. It appeared that some
506 members were unwilling to fully commit to the LCPE deliberations due to the Short Course
507 tensions. These two social processes are examples of how (non-) face-to-face networks of
508 interdependent relationships connected to the PEDG figuration can directly influence the
509 intended outcome of the curriculum development process 'in a messy and turbulent process'
510 (Chisholm, 2005).

511

512 **Conclusion**

513 Returning to the concept of power, the unbalanced power differentials which existed within the
514 PEDG influenced the direction of the LCPE curriculum development process. While power
515 relations existed between all actors and processes in the figuration (the PEDG), the focus in
516 this paper was between the teachers and the strong, well established members. As established,
517 the strong, well established members' biographies put these particular members in a powerful
518 position and therefore, in some ways, contributed to the deliberations at a higher level when
519 compared to the other members. To highlight, this does not indicated that the other members
520 did not contribute, they did and this was most noticeable in the conversations on assessment
521 (Scanlon, MacPhail & Calderon, 2019). These unbalanced power balances and possible

522 associated contestation is essential for the overall construction process (Goodson, 1983) and
523 adds to the complex, contested and socially constructed nature of curriculum development
524 (Penney, 2006). This paper raises a number of considerations in exploring the LCPE
525 curriculum development process and the influence of roles, relationships and social processes
526 within that development. These considerations can be applied to the curriculum development
527 process of any school subject, not just physical education as suggested in this paper.

528 Firstly, we question the role (and purpose) of ‘representative roles’ in subject
529 development groups. For instance, the findings suggest that many of the PEDG members’
530 contribution was based on their own views, values and beliefs, and not that of their nominating
531 agency. Similar to MacPhail (2015), “we are left considering to what extent the Committee
532 [PEDG] was a representative grouping” (p.241). A construct from the concept of
533 ‘representation’ (Pitkin, 1967; Vieira & Runciman, 2008) is ‘representation as advocacy’
534 (Urbinati, 2000). Urbinati (2000) explains how representation as advocacy has two features;
535 representatives sharing the views, values and beliefs of the agency which they are representing
536 and representatives engaging with a level of autonomy in sharing their own views, values and
537 beliefs. This is fuelled, as we have argued, by the high level of emotional involvement.
538 Facilitators need to be aware of this when recruiting representatives and support these
539 individuals in contributing a balanced representative perspective capturing their nominating
540 agency and their own judgement. This leads us to our second consideration.

541 Secondly, given the lack of clarity on the purpose of the representative roles, there is a
542 need for training for school subject curriculum development group members and their
543 nominating agency. With specific reference to the PEDG, and building on MacPhail’s (2015)
544 recommendation, it is recommended that the NCCA directly communicate with the nominating
545 agencies on the role of the PEDG, the nominating individual’s role and the remit of that
546 individual. This could prevent role frustration and role confusion during the curriculum

547 development process. This makes us consider the extent to which this represents a genuine co-
548 construction (curriculum) exercise. The involvement of national agencies, professional
549 development bodies, practicing teachers and student voice could potentially strengthen the co-
550 construction nature of the curriculum development process.

551 Finally, we express concern for the role of teachers in this process and argue that they
552 play a crucial and significant role in the school subject curriculum development process. Our
553 concern engenders from their lack of confidence, knowledge and/or skills to engage in the
554 LCPE deliberations. Despite the various opportunities that the teaching professional are
555 afforded in Irish curriculum development (predominantly through the NCCA consultation
556 process), teachers' involvement, and their confidence in involvement, in such a process can be
557 heightened by providing support as we will now discuss. We agree that 'by offering (tailored)
558 support to teachers, the enacted design process and the quality of the design materials are
559 expected to improve' (Huizinga et al., 2014, p.33). Facilitators (i.e., the NCCA) are the key
560 players in offering this support to teachers and should focus on curriculum design expertise,
561 pedagogical content knowledge and curricular consistency expertise in a bid to enhance
562 teachers' design expertise (Huizinga et al., 2014). For teachers to feel more involved in, and to
563 foster ownership in, the curriculum development process, the facilitators should provide
564 support to the teachers during all stages of the development process. Workshops focusing on
565 the above foci and the use of curricular design templates and reflection sessions are
566 recommended (Huizinga et al., 2014). Again, this should be considered for all school subject
567 curriculum development. We extend this consideration for teacher education as we suggest a
568 need for preparing teachers with a skill set which would enable them to contribute to and
569 invest in the co-construction nature of curriculum development. This could also allow the
570 teacher engage more effectively with designing curriculum at school level.

571 The LCPE curriculum was constructed in a contested manner, internal and external to
572 the PEDG, whereby ‘there was no neat alignment of interests; they were sometimes internally
573 fractured and alliances were unstable over time’ (Chisholm, 2005, p.193). For example, the
574 formation of splinter groups (internal) and the influence of the Junior Cycle reform discussions
575 (external). This paper supports Goodson’s (1983) and Penney’s (2006) conceptualisation of the
576 contested and socially constructed nature of the curriculum development process and highlights
577 the explanatory value of figurational sociology (Elias, 1978) in best understanding the
578 operational features of the PEDG. The curriculum makers’ experiences shared in this paper
579 will hopefully encourage future research to be conducted on the process of curriculum
580 development by exploring the dynamics of those sharing a space in curriculum development.

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