

# Primary teachers with expertise in PE

## *A win win for all?*

**A**s has been highlighted in recent articles in *InTouch*, not all children are receiving quality physical education consistently and many teachers do not feel competent and confident teaching physical education. In the light of the information we have we need to ask ourselves: do we want things to stay the same or do we want to initiate change to try and improve the quality of physical education in our primary schools? As professionals in the area of physical education our vote is overwhelmingly for change. Some recent articles have made excellent arguments in favour of there being no change to the current arrangement where the generalist teacher is responsible for delivery of physical education. We would like to suggest that this position needs to be

challenged, that alternatives need to be explored to open up debate on a model where teacher expertise in physical education can be increased. Specialist expertise is required to teach the physical education curriculum effectively and we support the view expressed in the *Report of the Joint Committees of the Oireachtas* (2005, p.24) that keeping the current system “will not allow the situation to change as much as it needs to”. Research suggests that increasing teacher expertise is the most effective way of impacting children’s learning. Changes that improve the quality of PE in our schools will benefit all children as well as many of the teachers involved.

The INTO Education Conference in Sligo in November 2007 initiated a debate on who should deliver physical education in our primary

schools. We would like to contribute to this debate by proposing a model that allows for an increase in expertise in physical education in our primary schools in a flexible and manageable way.

For our purposes we define the term ‘specialist’ as ‘more expert’ (whether in quota or ex-quota). An increase in expertise may improve the status of physical education in schools but the only real motivation for this suggested change must be the enhancement of the children’s learning in physical education equipping them for lifelong physical activity.

If we ask “How can we best support teachers in the delivery of physical education within the current system?” then the IPPEA have outlined a number of examples of how support is currently provided.

We support the call of previous articles for increased investment in supporting teachers development across

the career span, the calls for more time for physical education in the colleges of education, more personnel, more funding but given that none of these changes have materialised in any lasting way over the past 30 – 40 years we suggest that asking a new question might be more useful in impacting change.

When we change the question to “How can we best provide quality PE for all children?” new possible responses emerge. There are a number of different models currently being used in other countries that could be sustained and are feasible within an Irish context. It is desirable that the person who delivers physical education in the primary school has understanding and expertise in physical education and of the

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primary school system. The desired increase in expertise is possible in quota – a qualified primary teacher with an expertise in physical education.

The model we suggest has three routes to increasing expertise:

1. a) A new four year B.Ed. degree in 'Education and Physical Education' delivered by the Colleges of Education.  
b) Physical Education as an Arts subject within the current B.Ed. course.
2. A postgraduate qualification in Physical Education for primary teachers.
3. A postgraduate qualification in Primary Teaching for those with degree qualifications in physical activity and sport.

A combination of these three routes would allow for a critical mass of primary teachers with an expertise in physical education in schools – over a period of years one of these teachers would find their way into many schools across the country. This teacher could, but would not necessarily deliver all PE to all classes in all cases. This teacher would be a source of expertise within the staff to be used as appropriate within a given context. This teacher could deliver some strands of the curriculum to other classes groups. This teacher could also act as a support for other teachers in delivery of some strands.

Sometimes hearing alternative viewpoints open up new possibilities. If this model is to be considered then it is necessary to address some of the concerns that have been made against increased specialisation and may be expressed about this proposed development:

#### What if the class teacher wants to deliver all PE?

*Reply:* The model allows for the in quota primary teacher with

expertise in physical education to support colleagues at a desired level based on agreed parameters. This may mean in some cases delivering strands or strand units to class groups, in other cases acting as a source of updated information and ideas.

**Allowing someone else to deliver physical education is the beginning of an erosion of the role of the primary teacher as a generalist. The same argument could be made for music and art – do you think we should have specialist teachers there too?**

energy on areas of the curriculum they enjoy more. The teacher who delivers physical education within the proposed model is a qualified primary teacher also – one who is being allowed to teach to their strengths.

#### What of the integrated curriculum?

*Reply:* There is no reason why the class teacher cannot liaise with the teacher who delivers physical education to ensure integration across subjects. It is the chil-

**their own learning and deprive them of a key strategy in providing learning opportunities for children.**

*Reply:* This model does not discount the possibility of the class teacher delivering some strands of the curriculum if desired. This model allows for the class teacher to be supported by a colleague with expertise in the area to maximise learning.

**Will the role of the class teacher as a physical activity role model not be lost?**

*Reply:* This model provides an additional physical activity role model to the children.

**What if this leads to specialist teachers who are not qualified primary teachers delivering physical education?**


*Reply:* This model proposes that all teachers who deliver physical education are also qualified primary teachers. This eliminates the need for any debate around the superiority of pedagogical skills of teachers and coaches.

We hope that we have addressed some of the concerns raised by teachers about the possible introduction of specialist (more expert) teachers into the system. We believe that more expertise in physical education is essential if we aspire to quality physical education for all children. We look forward to hearing from your readers what they think of this proposal. We look forward to working with the DES and INTO in bringing about positive change in primary physical education in Ireland for the benefit of all children.

#### References

Houses of the Oireachtas (2005) Joint Committee on Education and Science, third report: *The Status of Physical Education*.

**Written by Déirdre Ní Chróinín and Elaine Murtagh, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.**



**The class teacher will know the children best but the teacher who delivers physical education is capable of developing an equally valid relationship with the children**

*Reply:* Perhaps it is a good idea to open up the debate on how we can best use expertise in schools. Many teachers already use informal arrangements with colleagues to allow them to teach in their area of expertise. When a teacher with an expertise in music joins a staff the music education in the school is enhanced considerably.

**Would allowing someone else to deliver physical education undermine the professionalism of the primary teacher?**

*Reply:* Firstly it must be recognised that within any staff there is a diverse range of talents and abilities and strengths in all curricular areas. There are many teachers who may be delighted to focus their

children's learning that must be integrated rather than that all learning must be delivered by one individual.

**What of the argument that the primary teacher knows the children best?**

*Reply:* The class teacher will know the children best but the teacher who delivers physical education is capable of developing an equally valid relationship with the children across the year, and across their time in the school. This relationship may not be the same as the class teacher-child relationship but this can still be a meaningful relationship.

**Would this not deprive the primary teacher of a key area of**