

Can a contextualised, sustained programme of professional development for the generalist primary teacher in physical education work?

Maura Coulter¹, Catherine Woods¹

¹*St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, Ireland,* ²*Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland*

Background

Good teaching has a positive impact on how and what children learn, therefore high quality professional development is a priority for teachers (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). With the introduction of the 1999 Irish Primary School Curriculum, provision of professional development (PD) in physical education is necessary to ensure that primary teachers are confident and competent to teach this subject. Irish national in-service and other types of in-service provision could be identified as 'training models' (Kennedy, 2005) and although a way of introducing new knowledge to the teacher, it does not support the current research findings on effective PD which;

- Should be 'workplace based' to avoid risk of decontextualisation (Fullan, 2001).
- is more effective when focused on the day to day realities of classrooms and involves collective participation (Lyon, Wylie and Goe, 2006).
- needs to be sustained (Armour, 2006)
- needs to be grounded in a sound theoretical and philosophical base. (Guskey and Huberman, 1995)
- should encourage partnership between teachers, schools and Higher Education Institutes

Research Questions

Based on these principles, this study evaluated the efficacy of a contextualised, whole school, sustained programme of PD, facilitated through a partnership between teachers, school and a physical education 'specialist' on developing quality physical education in a primary school.

The overall objectives of the study are to;

1. Identify the practices, perspectives and needs of the teachers in relation to physical education and Outdoor and Adventure Activities.
2. Design a contextualised, whole school sustained programme of continuous professional development (CPD) to empower teachers to teach quality Outdoor and Adventure Activities as part of their physical education programme.
3. Describe, investigate and evaluate the teachers', pupils' and the school principal's short and long-term views of the CPD intervention.
4. Evaluate the process of the CPD intervention.
5. Make recommendations to inform the future direction of design and delivery of CPD for primary teachers.

Methods

This study is a mixed-methods hierarchical study with qualitative methods being the primary approach in a case study school. There were five phases to the research. Phase one aimed to understand the research environment. Phase two included the design and development of the intervention which was informed by Phase 1, relevant literature and the personal experience of the researcher. The intervention was facilitated during this phase, whereby provision of resources, lesson plans and

schemes were provided to teachers and modelling of lessons for 27 teachers over 8 different class years was provided over a six week period. Phase 3 investigated the process of the PD intervention provision, and phase 4 established whether teachers could teach the Outdoor and Adventure strand with little or no support over a 6 week period, 6 months after the original intervention. Phase 5 evaluates the impact of the contextualised, sustained programme of professional development.

Data collection consisted of interviews, observations, field-notes, teachers' evaluations of their own lessons and focus group interviews with children.

Frame

Social constructivism provides the perspective within which to locate this research. The case study school, the teachers and pupils that form the basis of the study are viewed as existing within society, and this society is situated in time and influenced by history and culture. In 'simple terms' the research focuses on what teachers do, why they do it, what they know; and following an intervention - what teachers do, why they do it and has it changed, what they know. It searches for reasons and explanations and assumes that individuals have choices, albeit limited choices, ultimately who they are and what they know is as a result of their interactions with their world and with others in their world.

Charmaz (2006) advocates for a social constructivist perspective to grounded theory which guided the analysis of the data in this study. It has flexible guidelines and a focus on theory development which depends on the researcher's view in learning about the experience being researched. Therefore, it has potential for understanding the teachers' experience of the PD intervention, their thoughts and feelings on the process and the extent to which the PD had an effect on their teaching.

Research findings

A number of significant findings regarding teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge were revealed. Teachers choose modelling and provision of resources as their method of choice for PD provision and having experienced the intervention concluded that to 'see it [O&AA] being taught to my children in my school' was the best way to learn. The children were enthusiastic about O&AA and its content, however teachers found the technical aspect of the subject difficult and 'fear' emerged as a major theme in the analysis.

The data also suggests that there are both advantages and disadvantages to collaboration between teachers, schools and universities in the provision of CPD.

It was encouraging to see the positive effect that the CPD programme had on the school and the effect it had on teachers collaborating more in their planning and preparation in all other curricular areas. A number of recommendations are proposed in a bid to further the process of implementation of the PE Curriculum and these will be discussed in relation to international concerns regarding primary physical education PD with the generalist teacher.

Armour, K., 2006, Physical education teachers as career long learners: a compelling research agenda. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 11;3;203-207

Charmaz., K., 2006, *Constructing Grounded Theory; A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, London, Sage.

Fullan, M., 2001, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, (3rd Ed). New York, Teachers College Press.

Guskey, T.R., Huberman, M., 1995, *Professional Development in Education: New Paradigms and Practices*, New York, Teachers College Press

Kennedy, A., 2005, Models of continuing professional development: A framework for analysis, *Journal of In-service Education*, 31;2;235-250

Lyon, C., Wylie, E., and Goe, L., 2006, *Changing Teachers Changing Schools*. Paper Presented at the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA

Villegas-Reimers, Eleonora. 2003. *Teacher Professional Development: An International Review of the Literature*. Paris: UNESCO, International Institute for Educational Planning.