

A SURVEY OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN IRISH POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS*

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A national survey of post-primary schools in Ireland was undertaken to determine the extent to which physical education has been incorporated into the post-primary curriculum. It was found that 56% of schools in the sample employed a qualified physical education teacher. Large variations were found between schools of different sizes and types. The two main reasons given for not employing a physical education teacher were that the school had a full quota of teachers and the school lacked suitable facilities. Time allocated to physical education was often found to be less than that recommended by the Department of Education and this was especially noticeable in school years 4 and 5. Facilities were scarce and this was underlined by the fact that less than half the schools owned a gymnasium while only just over half owned playing fields.

Physical education is now an integral part of the education system of over thirty countries (1) and yet it still has an ill-defined role within the Irish educational system. The presence of physical education as a secondary school subject is attested to by a substantial teacher education institution, over 500 physical education teachers and an inspectorate within the Department of Education. Despite these facts, it appears that the subject has not yet been assimilated into the curriculum as a regular and essential educational activity. The aim of the study reported in this paper was to determine the precise extent to which physical education has been incorporated into the post-primary sector of the system.

A brief history of the teaching of physical education in Ireland illustrates the piecemeal development of the subject. Up till the 1960s, it was rarely taught in secondary schools and then only because of the keen interest of a principal and where facilities allowed. Convent schools tended to fare

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better than other schools, many employed physical education teachers who had been trained at Ling and Sion Hill colleges (both now closed). There was no similar teacher training institution for men in the republic, thus limiting the possibilities of boys' schools to employ teachers.

When the first organized system of technical education emerged in Ireland with the Vocational Education Act of 1930 it was intended that physical education should be included in the timetable of these schools. Understandably many schools were frustrated in their attempts to introduce the subject because they were unable to finance the expensive plant required for any worthwhile programme.

It was not really until the 1960s that physical education became established in the post primary sector. In 1963, Dr Hillery, the Minister for Education of the time, introduced the new principle of direct state provision in the form of a comprehensive school. Many such schools were provided with adequate physical education facilities which included an indoor activity area, outdoor tarmacadam area, playing fields and sometimes even a swimming pool.

In 1968, confirmation of the need for physical education in schools came with the first publication of a syllabus for the subject by the Department of Education (2). A rationale for the inclusion of physical education within the curriculum was provided and guidelines were set regarding staffing, time allocation and areas of work.

The introduction of community schools in the late sixties gave further impetus to the expansion of physical education. Amongst other things, they reflected a growing demand for community facilities like halls, gyms and swimming pools. Accordingly, these facilities were provided in the early schools. In addition, physical education teachers were employed and comprehensive programmes of physical education launched.

Up to this time there had only been training colleges for female teachers of physical education. This imbalance was rectified with the opening of the National College of Physical Education (now Thomond College of Education) which began preparing both male and female teachers. A regular supply of graduates was absorbed into the education system and thus it appeared that physical education was being taught in a wide range of post primary schools. The extent and nature of the expansion was largely unknown, however, and therefore the present survey was undertaken to clarify the situation and present an up to date picture of physical education as a timetabled subject.

The main objectives of the survey were firstly, to establish the number of qualified physical education teachers employed in the post-primary sector, 'qualified' being defined as having had at least two years of teacher training in physical education. Both full and part-time teachers were included; secondly, to establish the time allocated to physical education within the secondary school curriculum, i.e., lessons supervised by qualified physical education teachers; and thirdly, to determine the extent of facilities available for school based physical education. Such information was intended to show the extent of professionally taught physical education in the post-primary sector of Irish education; enable requirements for staffing and facilities to be accurately assessed and co-ordinated; and act as a reference point for future surveys which would thus make it possible to assess the rate of growth of physical education in Ireland.

METHOD

A questionnaire was sent to all recognized second level schools in the Republic of Ireland early in 1977. If a qualified physical education teacher was employed he/she was requested to supply information regarding physical education in the school. If there was no such teacher, the principal was requested to give details of facilities available for physical education. Of the 817 schools which were surveyed, 548 returned questionnaires which represents a 67% response rate.

RESULTS

Schools employing qualified physical education teachers. Fifty-seven per cent of schools in the sample employed one or more qualified physical education teachers. When this figure was analysed according to school type a significant picture emerged. Table 1 shows that a much greater proportion of community/comprehensive and secondary girls' schools than of vocational and secondary boys' schools employed physical education teachers. A further analysis considered the distribution of physical education teachers in different regions of the country (Table 2). Here there was a noticeable difference between regions and this extended to as much as 28% between Dublin city and the midland region. When the factor of school size was taken into account a clear trend of limited physical education provision was noticeable as the size of school decreased (Table 3). The imbalance was quite sizeable, with a very low proportion of smaller schools employing a physical education teacher.

TABLE 1

**NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGES OF SCHOOLS EMPLOYING
A PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER ACCORDING TO SCHOOL TYPE**

School type	Number of schools in sample	Number employing physical education teacher	%
Community/Comprehensive	29	25	86%
Secondary Girls	211	164	78%
Vocational	162	67	41%
Secondary Boys	146	54	37%
Total	548	310	57%

TABLE 2

**NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGES OF SCHOOLS EMPLOYING
A PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER ACCORDING TO REGION**

Region*	Number of schools in sample	Number employing physical education teacher	%
Dublin City	93	66	71%
South	148	90	61%
Eastern	103	57	55%
Mid West	70	36	51%
Northern	51	25	49%
Midland	83	36	43%

*Counties represented in each region outside Dublin city

South Cork Clare Kerry Limerick Waterford

Eastern County Dublin Wicklow Tipperary, Kilkenny, Wexford Carlow

Mid West Sligo Mayo Roscommon, Galway

Northern Donegal Leitrim Monaghan Louth Cavan

Midland Meath Longford Westmeath Offaly, Kildare Laois

TABLE 3

NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGES OF SCHOOLS EMPLOYING
A PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER ACCORDING TO SCHOOL SIZE

School size (pupil numbers)	Number of schools in sample	Number employing physical education teacher	%
800+	16	15	94%
600-799	39	34	87%
400-599	153	117	76%
200-399	219	109	50%
<200	116	30	26%
No size given	5		

Reasons for not employing a physical education teacher. According to principals, there were two main reasons that schools did not employ physical education teachers. The most common response (45%) referred to the limitations of the existing pupil-teacher ratio or quota system. The other palpable obstacle was the lack of suitable facilities; 35% of the sample mentioned this as an influencing factor. A full breakdown of the responses is given in Table 4.

TABLE 4

REASONS FOR NOT EMPLOYING A PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER

Reasons	Proportion of sample
Pupil-teacher ratio	45%
Lack of facilities	35%
No suitable applicants	6%
School too small	3%
Governing body will not approve appointment	2%
Unwilling to include physical education in curriculum	1%
Other reasons	8%

Time allocated to physical education It is clear from Figure 1 that time allocated to physical education within the timetable is limited, equalling roughly two forty five minute periods a week for Year Groups 1 and 2 with substantially less time for Year Groups 3, 4 and 5. Figure 2 identifies the average time allocated to physical education across different types of secondary school and this time is compared with that established recently in a study of British schools (4). There was a relatively high allocation of time in secondary boys' schools indicating a strong commitment in the relatively small number of schools (37%) employing physical education teachers. By contrast, the vocational sector which employs roughly the same proportion of physical education teachers allocated substantially less time throughout the five years. While the girls' secondary schools showed a gradual reduction in time allocation, the community/comprehensive schools showed a sharp decline in Years 4 and 5. Overall, the time allowed for physical education in Ireland is less than that provided in the secondary schools of England and Wales.

FIGURE 1

AVERAGE AMOUNTS OF TIMETABLED PHYSICAL EDUCATION
IN SCHOOLS WITH PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER

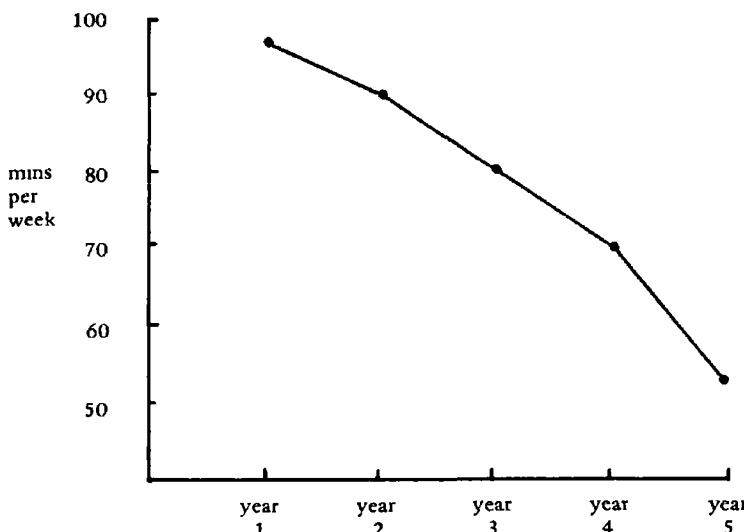
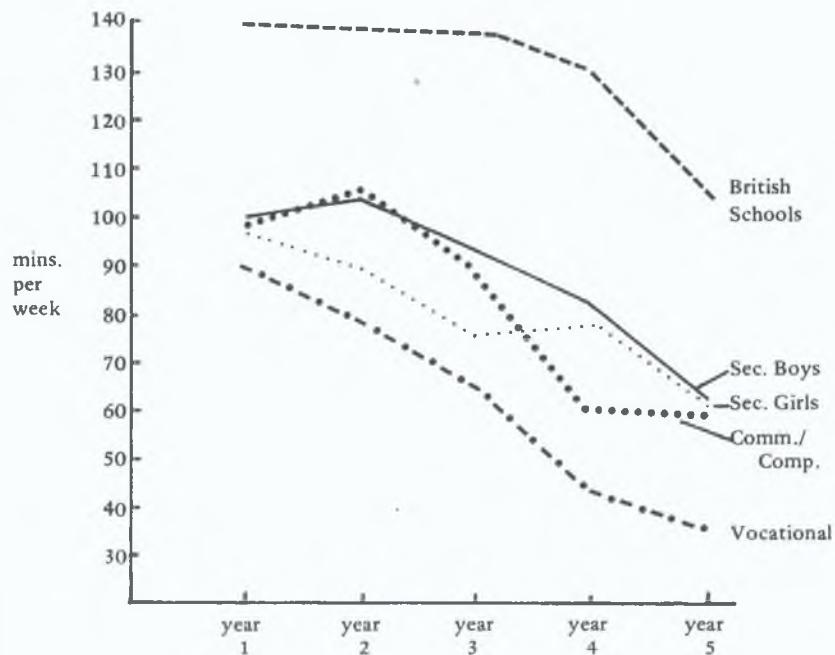


FIGURE 2

AVERAGE AMOUNTS OF TIMETABLED PHYSICAL EDUCATION
ACCORDING TO SCHOOL TYPE

Of the schools which did not employ physical education teachers 20% included no timetabled physical activity. The remaining 80% allocated a similar amount of time to that provided in schools with physical education teachers.

Facilities. Table 5 provides information on the numbers and percentages of schools, which possess four types of facility for physical education. The figures refer to schools with and without physical education teachers. Outdoor facilities (tarmacadam and playing fields) are more numerous than indoor ones (gymnasium/sports hall). A swimming pool is the facility least commonly available. When facilities which are hired or borrowed are taken into account, the picture of available facilities improves.

TABLE 5

NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGES OF SCHOOLS WITH FACILITIES

Facilities	Number of schools owning facilities	%	Total facilities available when hired and borrowed facilities are added
Outdoor tarmacadam	438	80%	88%
Playing fields	318	58%	83%
Gymnasium/sports hall	236	43%	77%
Swimming pool	38	7%	31%

Regional differences in facility provision were considerable (Table 6). When the figures for the three basic activity areas (i.e., gymnasium/hall, playing fields, outdoor tarmacadam area) were analysed there was a clear disparity between Dublin city and the other regions which extended to as much as 31% in the case of the northern region. Differences between other regions were smaller although still enough to indicate undesirable inequalities of provision.

TABLE 6
FACILITY PROVISION ACCORDING TO REGION

Region	Gym/Hall	Playing Fields	Tarmac Area	Proportion of schools owning all three basic facilities
Dublin City	79	58	90	83%
South	81	78	108	60%
Eastern	68	72	82	75%
Mid West	44	37	69	75%
Northern	24	24	32	52%
Midlands	47	50	62	60%

Table 7 illustrates the distribution of facilities according to school size. There was a remarkably even reduction in the ratio of facilities per school as the pupil population decreased.

TABLE 7
FACILITY PROVISION ACCORDING TO SCHOOL SIZE

School size (pupil nos.)	Number of schools	Total facilities owned	Average number of facilities per school
800+	16	54	3.3
600-799	39	118	3
400-599	153	368	2.5
200-399	219	427	2
<200	116	181	1.5
No size given	5		

DISCUSSION

The Greek notion of *sophrosyne* — *mens sana in corpore sano* — has not been held in high esteem by Irish educationalists. The post-primary school curriculum has traditionally been based upon examinable or vocational subjects with very little concern for the education of the physical. In keeping with other countries the value of physical education has recently been acknowledged and machinery has been set in motion to promote it as a timetabled subject.

The survey reported in this paper has shown that just over half the post-primary schools employed specialist teachers for physical education. However, not all sections of the school system were equally represented. With their modern approach and buildings, as one would expect, the community/comprehensive schools rated highly. Equally, the availability of trained female physical education teachers is associated with a high proportion of secondary girls' schools with specialist teachers. The striking feature of the results however is the low percentage of vocational and secondary boys' schools which employ physical education teachers.

It was also found that there was an uneven distribution of physical education teachers between different areas of the country. The highest proportion of schools with physical education teachers occurred in the two regions where physical education teacher training institutions have been located (Ling and Sion Hill formerly in Dublin city and Thomond College in the south). It may well be that many schools, affected by the proximity of these colleges, have been made aware of the value of physical education or have been influenced by the presence of student teachers on teaching practice. However, a difference of 20% or more between regions would not seem to be justifiable and necessitates some re alignment of investment.

When the factor of school size was examined, it became evident that there was a distinct lack of physical education teachers in the smaller schools. This particular analysis raises the question of the most desirable ratio of pupils to physical education teacher. Schools in Australia, Britain and the United States of America average one physical education teacher to approximately 250 pupils. Such a ratio may be desirable as a long term objective for Ireland but, in the present climate, schools with less than 400 pupils may not be able to support a full time member of staff for physical education alone. This need not be a restricting factor since all graduates of Thomond College of Education can offer a second subject enabling them to teach all the school's physical education programme and complete their personal teaching load with another subject.

It would appear that emphasis now needs to be placed on ways of enabling underprivileged sectors to employ specialist teachers. This would especially apply to vocational and secondary boys' schools, schools outside the Dublin area and schools with less than 400 pupils. A more widespread network of physical education teachers depends upon economic considerations concerning the pupil teacher ratio and the availability of facilities. When a school has a full quota of teachers, it is obviously a difficult task to engage a teacher of a new subject. Even if a staff member were to leave the school, a physical education teacher could not be employed without some agreement to a reduction of content in other areas of the curriculum. Unless some initiative is forthcoming from the Department of Education to alleviate the constricting quota system, principals will need to be persuaded about the value of physical education if they are to employ a physical education teacher before a teacher of another subject. The emergence of a new subject on the school curriculum undoubtedly causes timetabling problems. Subjects, with the help of their teachers, have stubborn survival properties even when their anachronistic qualities are evident. Our data on the time allocated to physical education in schools

thus need to be considered in the context of an emerging subject constrained by other timetable demands. However, they do not compare very favourably with the time devoted to physical education in British schools (4) or in schools in other countries — two to three forty-five minute periods per week (1), or even with the Department of Education's (3) recommended basic time allotment of one double and two single periods per week.

The decline in time devoted to physical education from junior to senior classes is no doubt a function of increasing examination commitments. It remains, nonetheless, a situation which will be viewed with concern by the physical education profession.

Suitable on-site, indoor activity areas are indispensable to successful physical education programmes especially in an unreliable Irish climate. The fact that only 43% of schools have such facilities is a major hindrance to the furtherance of physical education. It is equally unfortunate that only 58% of schools own playing fields, thus restricting the expansion of athletics and outdoor games. Some larger schools lack basic facilities; however, it is the smaller schools which will have the most difficult task of justifying the expense of physical education facilities. However, Ireland has a scattered, small, rural population which entails small, rural schools. The extensive facilities provided abroad are inevitably based upon schools with large pupil populations. Since the majority of Irish second level schools have populations of less than 400, it is rarely a viable undertaking to build expensive gymnasiums or swimming pools. In isolation schools are often helpless and the only answer would seem to be joint provision and usage by school and community. Such an association is quite relevant at the moment since community demand for recreation facilities is increasing and similar projects abroad are meeting with success.

Physical education is now being taught to large numbers of pupils and yet Ireland is still some way from being able to offer every secondary school pupil the opportunity of experiencing a well structured physical education programme taught by a qualified physical education teacher. Physical education has lost its fear of water; it must now learn how to swim.

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