

Advocating for quality physical education in Ireland

Title of the case study: *Advocating for quality physical education (PE): A sustained contribution to curriculum design, development, and enactment in Ireland*

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research: Members of the sport pedagogy research group based at the Department of Physical Education and Sports Science, University of Limerick: [Prof Ann MacPhail](#), [Dr Antonio Calderón](#), [Dr Elaine Murtagh](#), [Dr Daniel Tindall](#), [Dr Brendan O'Keeffe](#), [Brigitte Moody](#), [Prof Mary O'Sullivan \(Emerita\)](#), [Dr Deborah Tannehill \(Emerita\)](#), [Dr Missy Parker \(Emerita\)](#).

Underpinning research linked to UN Sustainable Development Goals

Goal 4 – Quality Education

Goal 3 – Good Health and Wellbeing

Summary of the impact

Research by the University of Limerick's Sport Pedagogy research group in the Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences has impacted physical education (PE) pedagogy and policy. Specifically, their research informed the development of second-level curricula in Ireland, including the recently established and examinable PE specification and Senior Cycle PE framework. The Sport Pedagogy's support model for PE teachers also led to several communities of practice, who develop teaching resources for implementing new curricula across second level. Through collaboration with teaching professionals and relevant stakeholders in Ireland, the research group developed a best practice model that informs both policy and its practical implementation.

Countries where the impact occurred: *Ireland*

Beneficiaries: Policy-makers, Department of Education, physical education (PE) teachers, pre-service teachers, second-level students, teacher educators, national PE associations

Description of the impact

In recent years, education policy-makers and practitioners in Ireland have increasingly recognised the role of physical education (PE) on students' holistic development and wellbeing. Since 2018, members of the Sport Pedagogy research group were among the key stakeholders in the development of Leaving Certificate PE, affording post primary students the opportunity to study PE as a Leaving Certificate subject for the first time. The Sport Pedagogy research group at University of Limerick played a key role in this development of PE. Their research has impacted the design, development, and establishment of new PE curricula across the Leaving Certificate (Scanlon et al., 2020), the Senior Cycle (15-18 years) (Calderon & Tannehill, 2020), and the Junior Cycle (13-15 years) (O'Sullivan et al., 2022). Through their research, the group have established a long-standing reputation of supporting PE educators and practitioners in Ireland. In the past five years, the increased pace of change in PE curricula has intensified this support.

In 2018, Prof Mary O'Sullivan was invited to Chair of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Development Group in Leaving Certificate PE. Thus, Prof O'Sullivan and the Sport Pedagogy group's research would inform the development of PE as a Leaving Certificate subject (LCPE). The NCCA drew on the group's findings related to PE pedagogy, curriculum enactment and professional development (Source 1). In addition, another group member Dr Deborah Tannehill led the design, development, and launch of a new structured framework for Senior Cycle PE (Source 2). This framework was based on curriculum models extensively researched by the research group. In all, eighty schools in Ireland participated in the roll-out of both the new Leaving Certificate and the Senior Cycle curricula. Currently, over 330 schools in Ireland offer the LCPE as a Leaving Certificate subject.

The Sport Pedagogy group's research supported PE teachers directly. When rolling out new PE curricula at all levels in secondary education (Junior, Senior, and Leaving Certificate), the research group supported PE teachers across the country by building learning communities of PE practice. They facilitated a series of national seminars to support teachers implementing the new 2018-2021 curricula for wellbeing and LCPE; and they "provided vital insight into the curriculum and directly impacted the design, development, and enactment of the curriculum" (Source 3). A significant impact of the learning community approach was that it brought together teacher educators and teachers to discuss common aspects of their professional responsibilities. In 2018-2019, Dr Tannehill and Dr Antonio Calderón used this approach to support PE teachers enacting the new Senior Cycle PE framework while piloting the use of a mobile application specifically designed to support this enactment. Teachers and teacher educators used the mobile application together, demonstrating they could form an effective learning community and successfully deliver the framework. One participant stated "These experiences helped me to gain value and purpose in what Influence I, as a teacher or 'policy-enactor' had on physical education policy and implementing a new curriculum. How my interpretation of a policy & perceived say in policy design can influence mine and my students' engagement (Source 4).

In 2020, Brigitte Moody and Dr Missy Parker surveyed post-primary teachers' views of Junior Cycle PE, the results of which will potentially inform future developments in Junior Cycle PE. The group led the NCCA project to create resources for LCPE teaching, learning, and assessment, resources (Source 5). In 2021, members of the research group participated in a national review of Junior Cycle PE, while Prof Ann MacPhail chaired the NCCA Junior Certificate PE Development Group.

Research description

A myriad of curricular reforms at post-primary level in Ireland triggered the overarching purposes of the Sport Pedagogy group's research: to support physical education (PE) teachers, pre-service teachers, and policy makers; and to contribute to the research literature on the complex process of policy design and enactment. For example, Scanlon, Calderon, and MacPhail (2020) adopted a case study design to allow a deeper exploration of the concept and implementation of teacher agency. A teacher was interviewed regularly during their first-year teaching Leaving Certificate PE (LCPE). These 19 semi-structured interviews encouraged reflection on each week's teaching of LCPE and explored how the curriculum was taught (pedagogy), how it was assessed (formally or informally), and the extent of students' learning.

The main findings from the case study suggested specific methods of supporting teacher implementation of new curricula. First, encourage communities of learners as forms of informal and formal professional development. Second, move away from discourse which presumes a significant amount of belief in the agency of teachers. These methods result in collaborative approaches to PE, overarching purpose for approaches that enable teachers to construct shared ideas on several important issues: (i) effective work towards achieving learner and teacher agency; (ii) policy-maker education on the realities (not the ideals) of teachers' roles in achieving agency and the importance of teachers' contexts; (iii) teacher education on how best to prepare pre-service teachers for this role; (iv) directives to PDST on how best to meet teachers' own learning needs.

Research outputs

From 2018, almost 50% of the Sport Pedagogy peer-reviewed publications have been published in the Top 10% Journal Percentiles (source: Scopus by CiteScore Percentile).

O'Sullivan, M., Moody, B., Parker, M., & Carey, M. (2022). A three-legged stool: Teachers' views of Junior Cycle Physical Education curriculum change. *European Physical Education Review*, 28(2), 482–499. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X211053811>

Calderón, A., & Tannehill, D. (2020). Enacting a new curriculum models-based framework supported by digital technology within a learning community. *European Physical Education Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X20962126>

Scanlon, D., Calderón, A., & MacPhail, A. (2020). Teacher agency in enacting physical education in a period of curriculum change and reform in Ireland. *The Curriculum Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.80>

Scanlon, D., MacPhail, A. & Calderón, A. (2019): Conceptualising examinable physical education in the Irish context: Leaving Certificate Physical Education, *Sport, Education and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2019.1664451>

MacPhail, A., Halbert, J., & O'Neill, H. (2018). The development of assessment policy in Ireland: A story of junior cycle reform. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 25(3), 310–326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2018.1441125>

MacPhail, A. (2015) The story of representation (or not) in contributing to the development of a school subject curriculum. *Irish Educational Studies*, 34(3), 225-243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2015.1064320>

Research grants

The Sport Pedagogy research group have been successful in securing funding from several Irish educational institutions such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Teaching Council, the Department of Health, and recently from the Government of Ireland and their Shared Island initiative. They have been also successful in securing European funding, being the most recent a project funded with €1.5M from the first Erasmus+ Teacher Academies Call (only twelve projects in Europe were successful) where they explore together with other partners how to improve the educational quality in physical education and physical education teacher education through an innovative conceptualisation of teaching and learning processes.