'PE should be an integral part of each school day': Parents' and their Children's Attitudes towards Primary Physical Education

Keywords: Physical education; parents; affective; attitude; cognitive; primary

Abstract

Formation of positive attitudes is an objective in primary physical education. Children are more likely to engage in physical activity if they adopt positive attitudes towards physical education and parents play a large role in their development. This study explores parents' and children's attitudes toward their school's physical education provision. Overall, parents and children had positive attitudes towards their school's physical education programme. Children and parents valued fun and enjoyment in the physical education programme (affective component). Health and fitness as well as team sport discourses were felt important by parents, but they had little knowledge of the content of their child's physical education programme (cognitive component). There was little difference in either of the affective or cognitive components of attitude across gender or class groups in each of the areas explored except in responses about what physical education does and should do in their child's school. The school community must explore ways to inform parents about, and support their child's learning in, physical education ensuring positive attitudes (cognitive and affective) are fostered and encouraged towards influencing positive physically active behaviours.

Introduction

Physical education and extra-curricular activities provide special environments to develop physical, technical and tactical skills, to ensure the enjoyment of playing

different activities, games and sports, and to promote lifelong fitness and good health through the recognition of the numerous values associated with the activities performed (European Commission 2015). It is recognised that special attention should be given to the education sector and its relevant role in health-enhancing physical activity promotion during childhood. Primary physical education contributes to the development of a child's fundamental movement skills and physical competencies; supports the development of physical, cognitive and affective skills and behaviours; and develops lifetime physical activity patterns (Rink and Hall 2008, Bailey *et al*. 2009). Physical education in this study is defined as an academic subject included in the curriculum and offered within normal school hours. For many children this may be the only opportunity to engage in physical activity and since almost all children attend school, a quality programme of physical education has the potential to reach most children (Trudeau and Shepherd 2005). The rise in positive perceptions and importance in physical education may be due to the growing understanding of the importance of regular appropriate physical activity. The perception of the worth of physical activity and physical education has risen over the last number of years, in Ireland, with the launch of the Get Ireland Active, National Physical Activity Plan (Healthy Ireland 2016), and its action around 'raising awareness among schools, particularly primary schools, of opportunities to educate through physical activity' (p.16) and the recent launch of Leaving Certificate Physical Education (NCCA 2017) an examinable subject at second level, which recognises the interests and the talents of physical activity as the central part of young learner's educational development (O' Sullivan 2018).

According to Woods (2014) 'opportunities for children to be active should be facilitated through the family, the school and in community settings where the child

lives' (p.111). Parents of school aged children and their attitudes and perspectives can be a key determinant in facilitating children's adoption of physical education and physical activity. Parents are important teachers and social referents for all children (Raudsepp 2006). The work of Stuij (2015) has shown that children from both high and low socio-economic groups learn from the nuclear family, with those from lower socio-economic groups learning from friends and their physical education teacher in addition. Many educators encourage parents to participate in the educational process because they believe that parental involvement is critical in children's education (Wilkinson and Schneck 2003). Indeed, researchers in their empirical studies have revealed that students experience positive outcomes in terms of learning and academic achievement in many subjects due to parental involvement (Anderson and Minke 2007; Green and Walker 2007). The starting point of parental involvement may be their perceptions of or beliefs about school subjects and educational topics. Promoting positive attitudes in physical education and physical activity is an important component in promoting an active lifestyle (Silverman and Subramaniam 1999; Noonan *et al*. 2016). Physical education experiences offered in school influence attitude, which in turn influence attitude toward physical activity and subsequently physical activity behaviour (Bailey, 2006; Kretschmann 2015; Portman 1995; Robinson 1990; Solmon and Lee 1996; Zeng *et al*. 2011). Children are more likely to engage in physical activity both in and out of school if they adopt positive attitudes towards physical education lessons (Nicaise *et al*. 2007). There is a widely held belief that parent's perceptions about physical education matter a great deal (Blankenship 2000; Sheehy 2006, 2011; Graham 2008). Despite this, research undertaken on the importance of the link between parents and schools with regard to physical education is scarce (Graham 2008; Jaekwon 2015). Researchers have mainly focused on

parents' effects on their children's motivation, achievement, and competence in sport (Bois *et al*. 2005; Fredricks and Eccles 2004; Ullrich-French and Smith 2006). In addition, some researchers concentrated on coaching preferences of parents (Martin *et al*. 2001), and parents' perceptions of youth sport and interference with family time (LaVoi and Norri 2011). While many studies indicated that parents are important socialising agents in the field of sports (Birchwood *et al.* 2008; Nielsen *et al*. 2012; Scheerder *et al.* 2005), Sheehy (2006) found 'that parents knew remarkably little about their child's physical education program, and what they did know was often inaccurate' (p. 244). The Physical Education Teacher Guidelines (Government of Ireland, 1999b) emphasise the need for the 'support of parents' (p. 27) and also encourages seeking the support of parents 'so that children derive maximum benefit from physical education' (p.27). More recently the Department of Education and Skills (2016) stated that, 'there are many challenges for your young people if they are to adopt a healthy lifestyle and enjoy positive health and wellbeing to their full potential. We can, in collaboration with parents and families, all do more to address these challenges' (p.1).

Socialisation into sport and physical activity can be considered a modelling process in which family members are powerful role models. Studies revealed that both parents' exercise patterns and encouragement have an effect on children's exercise behaviour, and that physically active parents tend to have physically active children (Sallis *et al*. 1999). For instance, family participation and an active involvement in the children's physical activity promote players' greater satisfaction and positive participation in their sport career (Wuerth *et al*.2004; Torregrosa *et al*. 2007). Basically, if we want to engage children in sport practice from an early age and progress to reach their full potential, then it is definitely essential to have a good

environment during these formative years, and parents play a very important role in this process (Sanchez-Miguel *et al.* 2013).

Irish Physical Education Context

Physical education is a compulsory curriculum subject in Irish primary schools. The Physical Education Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999a) provides an overview of the content for each class level and the accompanying Physical Education Teacher Guidelines (Government of Ireland 1999b) advises on the implementation of the curriculum in relation to planning, approaches and methodologies. The purpose of physical education is 'to provide children with learning opportunities through the medium of movement and contribute to their overall development by helping them to lead full, active and healthy lives' (Government of Ireland 1999b, p. 2). The principles on which curriculum experiences are built illustrate a broad educational emphasis and include the importance of enjoyment and play, the maximum participation by all children in curriculum experiences, providing opportunities for the development of skills and understanding, a balance between competitive and non-competitive activities, contact and non-contact activities, providing opportunities for achievement and providing activities equally suitable for girls and boys (Government of Ireland 1999b). However, according to Ní Chróinín (2018), there is a gap between the aspirations of the curriculum and reality of teaching and learning experiences in Irish primary schools. Lack of resourcing and inconsistency in relation to delivery of the curriculum, largely as a result of issues with the confidence and competence of generalist teachers due to insufficient preparation and supports, has resulted in narrow, games-dominated physical education experiences for many children in Irish primary schools that lack an explicit developmental learning focus.

Valuing of parental involvement in children's education is not limited to Ireland, and many countries have a national policy to encourage parental involvement in their children's education (Mullis, Martin, Minnich, Drucker and Ragan 2012; Mullis, Martin, Minnich, Stanco, *et al.* 2012). This study sets out to explore parents' and their child's attitudes towards physical education provision, in one primary school.

Method

Context

This quantitative study was carried out in one large, suburban, mixed primary school with a number of classes at each level. The school was situated in an affluent area, though a number of children (1%) came from the Travelling Community. There were 28 class teachers and 780 pupils (aged 4 to 14 years) in the school. Each class had approximately 29 children and was timetabled for 45 minutes of physical education each week. With 27 classes in the school (2 teachers job-shared), it was not possible to schedule an hour of physical education for each class each week in the general purpose hall therefore times allocated were between 40-50 minutes depending on the class. Physical education lessons took place indoors or outdoors, although if the hall was in use for other purposes or if inclement weather, the lesson was postponed or cancelled. The school had a broad array of on and off-site areas where physical education was taught such as yards, green spaces and community greens. The school entered many inter-schools' competitions each year in Gaelic Football, Hurling/Camogie, Cricket, Tennis, and Athletics. A number of coaches from National Governing Bodies (NGBs) provided additional coaching during the school

day, supplementing the games programme of the curriculum. These coaches offered programmes in Gaelic Football, Basketball and Cricket.

Framework guiding the study

According to Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reasoned action, attitudes influence a person's intention for engaging in physical activity, a major part of physical education. Factors such as attitudes and beliefs play an important role in determining whether an individual decides to participate in and maintain active behaviour (Cameron *et al*. 2006). Attitude is often considered to be at the forefront of what controls our behaviour and is a factor in just about every school subject across the curriculum (Marttinen *et al*. 2018). Biddle and Mutrie (2008) explain this as attitude is usually about feelings but it will also involve beliefs and behaviour. Attitudes toward physical activity have been shown to improve over time with proper intervention (Craeynest *et al*. 2008). This is why it is important to gain deeper insight into parents' and children's attitudes physical education and physical activity.

Single, dual, and multi-component views of attitude have been presented in the literature. The single-component view considers affect alone while viewing the other components (cognitive and behavioural) as contingencies of the affective dimension (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). There can be a lack of a consistent relationship between attitude and behaviour when these components are measured, promoting researchers' contentions that attitude includes both cognitive and affective components (Subramaniam and Silverman 2007). The dual-component view considers the cognitive component as well. The cognitive component measures beliefs about the attitude object (e.g., attitude toward physical education) and the affective component measures emotions and feelings toward the attitude object. The multi-

component view of attitudes includes conation (behaviour) as a third construct. Due to the inconsistent relationship between attitude and behaviour in the single-component and multi-component views (Subramaniam and Silverman 2007), the dual component (affect and cognition) view of attitude is most often employed in attitude research. In this view, affect relates to the fun or enjoyment aspects of attitude while cognition refers to the importance or perceived usefulness of the attitude object. This preferred view for measuring attitude has been used by researchers interested in creating and measuring attitudes of teachers and students toward physical education (Donovan *et al.* 2015; Phillips and Silverman 2012; 2015; Subramaniam and Silverman 2000 2007). In order to ascertain the attitudes and understanding of parents and children towards physical education provision in primary school by a generalist teacher, the dual component model of attitude informed the questionnaire design. Because attitudes are psychological entities they reside in the private experience of the individual and cannot be directly experienced by others. But if attitudes do exist they should be measurable. For the purpose of this paper attitude is seen to be a non-observable, complex but stable disposition reflecting both direction and intensity of feeling towards physical education. The knowledge gained from this study about what parents and children understand, think and feel about physical education can be utilised to make physical education a more meaningful experience for the children.

Data collection

Following a review of research carried out on attitudes of parents and children towards their school's physical education programme, a 37-item questionnaire was adapted from a previously validated questionnaire used by Tannehill *et al.* (1994) in a study carried out in the US examining attitudes toward physical education. The

questionnaire consisted of both closed (33 questions comprising of yes/no, choice and Likert Scale) and open-ended (4) questions. Demographic information included personal attributes for each child: age, gender, class, and level of ability. The next section of the questionnaire derived from theoretical attitude constructs which were used to organise sections of the questionnaire into: 'Affective' component of attitude- (i) likes, dislikes, and feelings towards physical education; and (ii) value of physical education and 'Cognitive' component of attitude - (i) goals, aims, and importance of physical education; (ii) most and least important skills and activities in the physical education curriculum. Research questions guiding the questionnaire dealt with attitudes toward physical education related to what parents and their children think physical education should and actually does include (Likert scale forced parents to respond from definitely yes (1) to definitely no (5) on each item); what they think the goals of physical education should be, and how important it is (Likert scale ranging from a lot more important (1) to a lot less important (5) for each item); and what experiences children had in physical education that may have influenced their attitudes toward the subject matter. Parents in addition were asked: whether physical education should be required; whether physical education should be graded; and their knowledge about their child's physical education class.

Three physical education experts, not involved in the research study, reviewed the questionnaire for construct validity and clarity of language and meaning.

Five hundred questionnaires were distributed, one to the eldest child in each family within the school. Parents completed the questionnaire with the eldest child in the family attending the school where they had more than one child in the school. Children's responses were recorded by parents in consultation with their child. Ethical

protocol for this study was approved by Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Data Analysis

Closed Questions

Statistical analysis was undertaken using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for Windows, version 14.0. Data were manually and statistically searched for unexpected values and original data were consulted in order to clarify any unusual set. Whole sample and where appropriate gender- and class group-specific means and standard deviations were calculated. Data is analysed utilising class groups in order to align with the Physical Education Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999) structure and content whereby the eight years a child spends in Primary school is presented in 2 year cycles (Junior and Senior Infants, First and Second Class, Third and Fourth Class and Fifth and Sixth Class). Data are presented as means, standard deviations and percentages where appropriate. Chi Square analysis were conducted to investigate the association between gender and class group associations with variables such values within physical education and attitudes towards strands in physical education. An independent t-test and a one way Anova were used to investigate gender and class group differences in attitude measures. A Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was conducted to explore relationships between parents' feelings of what should be taught in physical education and what is actually taught in physical education.

Open Ended Questions

Open ended questions on the questionnaire were analysed by the three experts who reviewed the questionnaire originally. They read and reread all responses to these

questions independently and determined a set of categories that would best represent the issues from the parents' perspective. Each expert coded a response for each open-ended question from 20 questionnaires. The original categories determined were then reviewed, discussed and clarified and a further 20 questionnaires each were coded and reliability established at an acceptable 82%. Categories determined included health and fitness, who taught physical education, programme content, competition, time allocated to physical education and enjoyment of physical education. Using NVivo (QSR NVivo version 10) the qualitative responses from each of the four open-ended questions were coded to the agreed categories. Qualitative data was also analysed for word frequencies.

Results and Discussion

The results from the demographic data will be presented initially followed by presentation and discussion of the remaining data using the theoretical attitude constructs which guided the design of the questionnaire supported by the literature.

Demographics

A total of 300 questionnaires were returned representing a 60% return rate. Eighty-three percent of the respondents were mothers and 16% were fathers. Since some literature suggests that fathers are more influential in shaping children's sport involvement (Lewko and Greendorfer 1988), it could be argued that the extent of parental influence might actually be underrepresented in this study. The questionnaires were completed on behalf of 53% sons (159) and 47% (141) daughters (age range 4-12, mean 8.68, SD± 2.417), which was a representative sample of those attending the school. Figure 1 illustrates the participant children grouped by gender

and class group. The majority of respondents (51.5%) indicated that they live in the suburbs (population <500,000) and 39.4% live in a big city (population 500,000+). The remainder (9.1%) live in towns (<50,000) or villages (<5000). One hundred and eleven (37.1%) parents had other children attending the same school. Five parents (1.7%) indicated that the child they were completing the questionnaire with had a physical disability.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Affective Component of Attitude Towards Physical Education in the School

In this section the parent's and children's likes, dislikes, and feelings towards physical education; and their reporting of the value of physical education in their school (the affective component of attitude) are presented and discussed.

Likes, dislikes and feelings towards physical education

The majority of parents (90%) reported that their children had positive feelings towards physical education and 'enjoyable' or 'very enjoyable' was the most frequently expressed reason for this. Enjoyable physical education experiences seem to foster positive attitudes towards and encourage participation in physical education (Subramaniam and Silverman 2002; Prochaska *et al*. 2003). Around the world (Jones and Cheetham 2001; Lake 2001; O'Sullivan 2002; Macdonald *et al*. 2005; Dyson 2006; Smith and Parr 2007) participation in physical education is perceived by pupils as a break from the rest of school life, an opportunity for non-serious non-academic socialising that is about fun and enjoyment. The primary school curriculum in Ireland includes fun and enjoyment as a key vehicle to promote lifelong physical activity participation (Government of Ireland 1999b). From the responses recorded by parents

in this study, it can be seen that 88.2% of children have fun in physical education and 70.6% like the variety of activities offered by their teachers. Although the children described their physical education experience as fun, the concept of fun has rarely been explored in physical education beyond descriptive investigations of what children say about their experiences (Garn and Cothran 2006). While some researchers see fun as a long-term intrinsic affect linked to movement participation that is critical to physical education (Prochaska *et al.* 2003), others have defined fun as a short-term extrinsic construct that is a limited outcome of physical education (McNamee and Bailey 2010). Despite the shortcomings of primary physical education provision outlined earlier in this article, almost all Irish children identify physical education as the school subject they most enjoy (Broderick and Shiel 2000; Blinded for review 2011). Tannehill *et al*. (2015) suggest Irish children value physical education experiences, suggesting that such experiences allow them to be with friends, try a variety of activities, have fun and be outside. Despite these different meanings the concept of fun is a recurring one in children's descriptions and understanding of physical education (Dismore and Bailey 2011) and is an important feature of meaningful experiences in physical education for young children (Beni *et al.* 2017).

Although parents reported that their children liked physical education quite a large number reported that their child felt they were better at other subjects (57.8%) than they were at physical education. The positive to be taken from this is that children do not feel they have to excel in physical education in order to enjoy or have fun in the subject. Despite many feeling that they may not be as good at physical education as other subjects, parents reported that 93.6% of their children would choose to do physical education even if they did not have to. There was only a slight

difference in the responses between boys and girls with 5.2% of boys choosing not to do physical education compared to 8.1% of girls.

Value of physical education in school

Children (60.8%) felt that the time given to physical education was too short. In addition to 61% of parents in this study felt that the school's time allocation to physical education should be increased. This was further highlighted in the open-ended questions where parents were asked for further comments and over 15% of responses were coded to the 'time' category. They reiterated that they would like more physical education for their children. The responses from these parents ranged from increasing physical education to twice a week to scheduling daily physical education:

> *'It's too short, more PE with more variety'.*
>
> *'I would like to see more PE at least twice per week'*
>
> *'I think they should have longer than 40mins once per week'*
>
> *'PE is important and would like to see them have PE twice per week at least.*
>
> *PE should be an integral part of each school day, on the same footing as any class'.*
>
> *'PE should be daily'.*

The time allocated to physical education in the study school was 45 minutes with the Curriculum (1999a) recommendation being at least 60 minutes each week. Internationally the average time offered to physical education lessons during the primary school phase is 97 minutes per week (range of 25-220 minutes) (UNESCO 2014) well above the time reported in this study but within the average time allocated (46 minutes) in Ireland as reported by Woods and colleagues (2010). The European Commission (2015) advocated for 'the minimum physical education taught time

recommended during compulsory education period should be increased to at least 5 lessons per week (~ 5 hours)' (p.13).

A few parents highlighted in the open-ended questions that it was a '*shame*' and a '*pity*' when lessons were cancelled as a '*punishment for minor infringements in class*'. One parent pointed out that physical education was '*regarded as a treat to be cancelled if the pupils misbehave during the week as opposed to part of the curriculum*'. These negative feelings reported by parents and children demonstrate that they feel that physical education lessons are not valued by some teachers in the school.

Parents were asked to rate a number of statements representing their feelings towards what they ideally felt their child's physical education lessons should do and what they actually did do. When identifying their feelings about what physical education actually does teach their children 63.4%, in this study, indicated that their child is taught to play team sports, 62.6% team sports skills and interestingly fitness was emphasised by over half of respondents (54.4%) although it is not a component of the curriculum taught in the study school directly. A Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was conducted to explore these relationships. Strong (**) relationships were noted between many of the parent's responses to the statements, most particularly in the area of improving fitness, teaching sports skills and teaching children how to play sports skills. Parents, in the case of these statements, felt that their child's physical education lessons should address these areas more even though they did feel they were being taught in school, these also showed significance (* $P \leq 0.05$). (See Table 1. for further details). Parents also felt that teaching individual sports skills and teaching how to play individual sports skills should be taught but they felt less strongly that these activities were being taught in their children's

physical education classes. Finally, dance was the area most felt was not being taught but only felt somewhat strongly about its inclusion in their child's physical education lessons.

Actually Does ↓	Should do →	Improve fitness	Teach team sports skills	Teach to play team sports	Teach individual sports	Teach to play individual sports	Teach dance	Teach recreational games
Improve fitness	Pearson Co	.282**	.315**	0.069	.124	0.091	-0.036	0.041
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000*	0.000*	0.246	0.039*	0.129	0.555	0.495
Teach team sports skills	Pearson Co	.190**	.250**	.212**	0.023	0.029	-0.115	-0.037
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001*	0.000*	0.000*	0.706	0.630	0.057	0.538
Teach to play team sports	Pearson Co	.196**	.244**	.320**	0.063	0.056	-0.002	0.040
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001*	0.000*	0.000*	0.299	0.356	0.978	0.513
Teach individual sports	Pearson Co	.180**	.209**	.224**	.299**	.288**	0.042	0.053
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.003*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.494	0.388
Teach to play individual sports	Pearson Co	.222**	.275**	.240**	.364**	.375**	0.050	0.046
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.412	0.451
Teach dance	Pearson Co	0.062	.172**	0.071	.119	.115	.258**	.129
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.305	0.004*	0.236	0.049*	0.057	0.000*	0.033*
Teach recreational games	Pearson Co	0.092	0.116	.135	0.033	0.033	0.017	.195**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.121	0.051	.024*	0.583	0.587	0.780	0.001*

Table 1. Correlation between 'what my child's physical education lessons should do' and 'what my child's physical education lessons actually do'. * denotes where p≤ 0.05 and ** denotes a strong relationship (where r = 1 - 2.9 is small; r =0.3-0.49 is medium and r = 0.5 – 1.0 is large.)

Cognitive Component of Attitude Towards Physical Education in the School

Parent's and children's attitude towards the goals, aims, and importance of physical education; and the most and least important skills and activities in physical education in their school (the cognitive component of attitude) are presented and discussed in this section.

Goals, aims and importance of the physical education programme

Physical education lessons should provide children with opportunities to practise new skills. Murphy and Ní Chróinín (2011) state that 'a broad experience in a supportive

environment gives children the best chance of being successful movers and a good chance of finding activities they enjoy and want to repeat' (p. 141). To support the category of health and fitness in the qualitative coding of parent's responses to the question, 'what was the most important contribution physical education made to their child's education' a word frequency analysis of the qualitative data was carried out. Health and fitness ranked as the most important with over 240 references (count for words including fitness, active, and health). Responses, for example, included the following;

> *'A love of exercise and an introduction to as many different kinds of sport and exercise as possible'*
>
> '*Teaches team participation and importance of physical activity in our age of obesity.'*
>
> *'Being active and enjoying being active.'*

Parents have long been recognised as having an important role in influencing how physically active their children are (Brustad 1993; Biddle and Goudas 1996). When asked if the school provided enough lesson time for physical education and other physical activity 61.4% of parents indicated 'no'. Parents (55.7%) felt that they did not know enough about physical activity organised by the school after school. This contrasted starkly with parents' knowledge of what was available in the community with only 26.1% of parents not aware of what sport is available for their child in the community. When exploring the responses further it was noted that the parents of younger children (39.1% boys and 39.2% girls) knew less about what was available in the community compared to older children's parents (22.8% boys and 25.5% girls).

Importance of physical education

Parents were asked to rank attitudes, values and character development outcomes of physical education classes which they felt were most and least important to their child's physical education (see Figures 2a and 2b). Fun and enjoyment was the thought by parents to be the most important attitude and value (98.5%) supporting the results discussed earlier further. The next outcome that parents thought was important for their child was 'teamwork' (97.3%). Interestingly 'participation in class' was not seen as an important value nor was 'competition'. Many would see 'competition' and 'sportsmanship and respect for officials' as related, however in the case of primary school children competition in sport does not feature in out-of-school sport for many of the National Governing Bodies of Sport, particularly those responsible for team games. 'Competition' was the least important outcome reported by parents for their child (95.7%). Perhaps linked to 'competition' being the least important value outcome was that 41.4% of parents reported that their child felt 'bad if I lose at PE or games'. In their reporting, parents value 'sportsmanship' and following chi-square tests significant was noted in particular for boys ($p \leq .003$). Similarly, significance was noted following cross tabulation with class groups ($p \leq .009$) where parents reported 'sportsmanship and respect for officials' as more important for children in the fifth and sixth class group (23.3%) compared to those reporting on behalf of the younger class groups (5.8%-15.1%). Sport and health/fitness ideologies have been identified as the most influential discourses in physical education (Green 1998; Kirk 1999; Penney and Evans 1999; Lake 2001; Green 2008; Kretchmar 2008) and these are evident in the parents' responses. Garrett and Wrench (2007) highlight that the dominance of sport and health ideologies is a direct reflection of wider physical culture: 'the discourses that achieve dominance in physical education do so with support and close alignment to the hegemonic discourses of wider society' (p. 27). It

may be that this discourse is what is informing parents as to what their children should be doing in physical education.

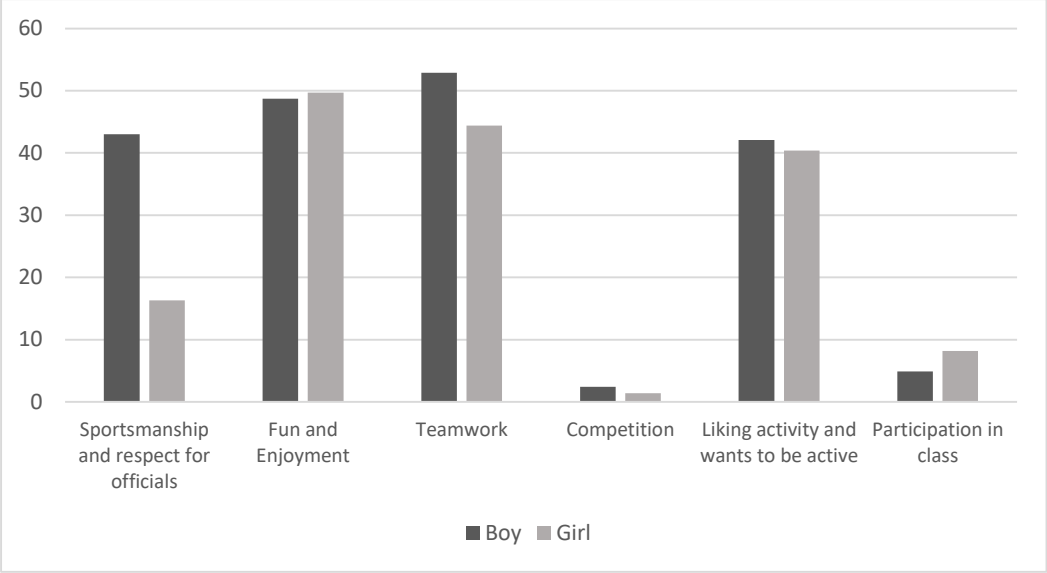

Figure 2a. Most important attitude, value and character development outcomes of physical education.

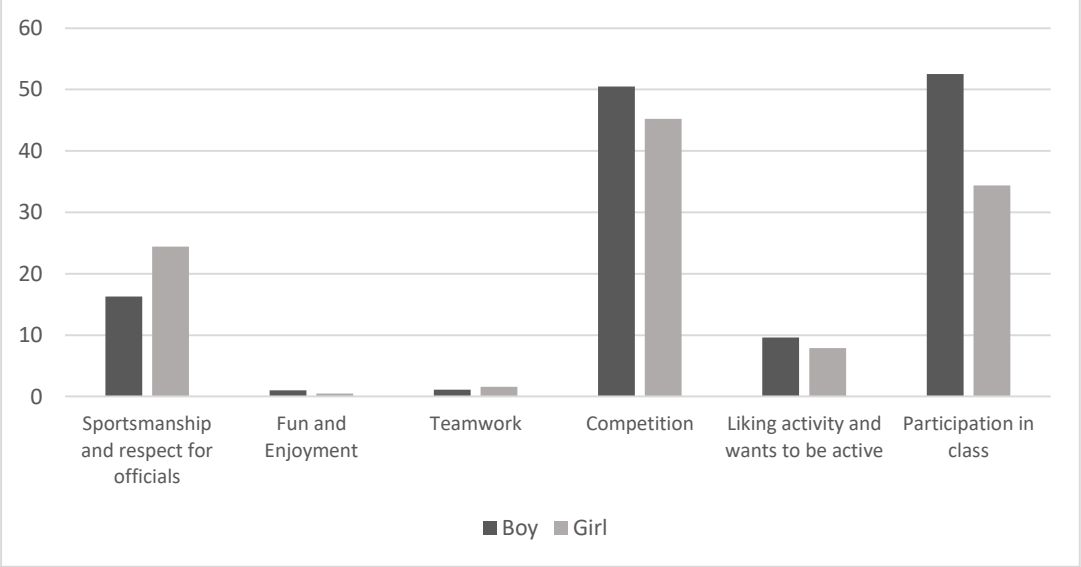

Figure 2b. Least important attitude, value and character development outcomes of physical education.

When parents were asked to rank the most important and least important skills and activities for their child taught in physical education (see Figure 3a. and 3b.). Although not one of the strands of the physical education curriculum, 90.8% of parents ranked health and fitness as the most important skill and activity of a physical education programme. This further reinforces the dominant health discourses outlined previously and perhaps supports the aim of physical education which is to help children 'lead full, active and healthy lives' (Government of Ireland 1999b, p.2). Team games was also reported by parents as an 'important' skill and activity (93.9%) but very interestingly parents felt quite strongly that topics such as dance (92.2%) and gymnastics (86.7%) were the least important skills and activities taught in a physical education programme. It is interesting to note that there was very little difference in responses for boys and for girls with the most significant response ($p \leq 0.000$) occurring in the responses to the importance of dance. When skills and activities were cross tabulated with class groups, significance only occurred with health and fitness ($p \leq 0.020$), where parents of fifth and sixth class children felt this skill and activity was most important for this class group (32.2%) compared to the younger class groups (18% - 20.9%).

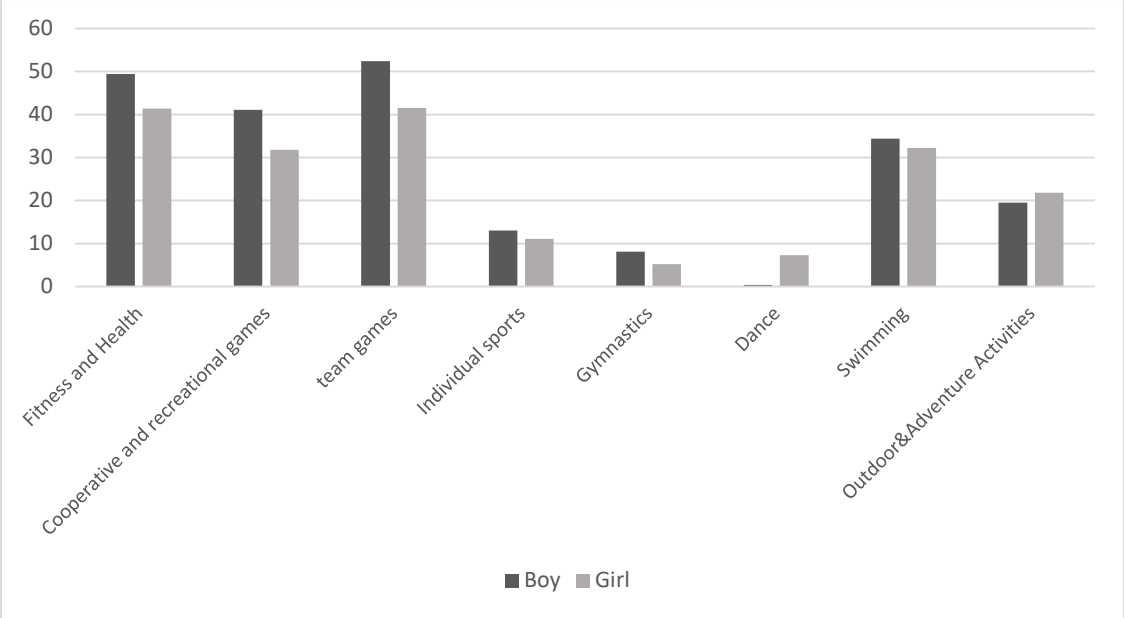

Figure 3a. Most important skills and activities taught in physical education.

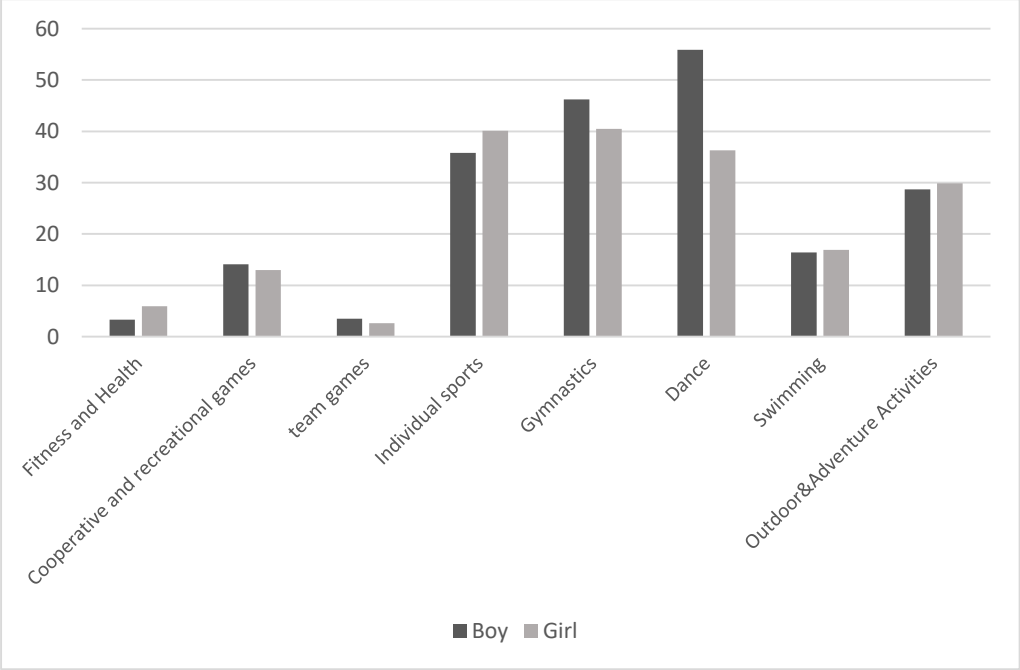

Figure 3b. Least important skills and activities taught in physical education.

Although 81.6% of parents reported that physical education was considered either ‘very important’ or ‘important’ in their child’s school and a strong part of its

ethos, 40% of parents in this study reported not knowing what their child was learning in physical education. Parents' 'failure to advocate for physical education and physical activity in schools is due at least in part to the lack of information available to them' (Woodward-Lopez *et al.* 2010, p. 29). Further to this, 91% of parents surveyed attended their child's Parent-Teacher Meeting but 73% admitted to not inquiring about their child's physical education. When asked if they had any further comments to add, some parents (3%) added that they would like to know more about their child's physical education programme and how their child was progressing in physical education. This parent's response encapsulates the general response;

'*I would like to know more about PE programme. My child says she enjoys PE but I didn't realise how much, often children don't tell about what goes on in school so written information would be beneficial*'.

From an international perspective, parent-teacher communication about pupil progress in general was far less frequent in Ireland than in most countries. Over half (58%) of parents internationally, were informed about their child's learning progress at least 3 times a year but in Ireland only 13% of parents were informed, the lowest frequency of all participating international countries according to Eivers and Clerkin (2013).

When the class teacher did not teach the physical education lesson parents (38.6%) reported that their child was taught by external coaches (cricket, Gaelic football and basketball). In support of 'specialists' teaching at primary schools, where the government policy is that the class teacher teaches all subjects including physical education, seven parents reported that they would like to see a specialist physical education teacher teach their child. The prevalence of games taught reported and supported by parents, coupled with their support of more teaching of games in the

school and including the teaching of physical education by external coaches, highlights the value of games in this particular primary school, by children, parents and teachers. As reflected in the prevalence of external providers in other countries (Griggs 2010), there is a consistent trend of national governing bodies such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) and the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) delivering large parts of the physical education programme in many Irish schools. This over-emphasis on team invasion games risks children not experiencing a broad and balanced programme as these coaches may be more concerned with developing the skills of students to partake in a particular sport outside school and promotion of the team game they represent than the holistic development of all children (Bowles and O'Sullivan 2012). The core areas of the Irish physical education curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999a) align with common elements of physical education curricula internationally including games, gymnastics, athletics, aquatics, dance and outdoor and adventure activities (Coulter and Ni Chroinin, 2013). The terms sport and physical education are often used interchangeably in school contexts, where sport and health shape what is understood by the term physical education (Green 1998; Hardman 2007; Coulter and Ni Chroinin, 2013).

Overall attitude – cognitive and affective components

In order to achieve a total 'attitude score' for each child the sum of 14 items made up of 8 affective items (e.g. I enjoy PE and games lessons in school), and 6 cognitive items (e.g. I am good at sport) was calculated. Each item was rated using a Likert Scale of 1-4 with some scores inverted where negative statements were presented. A positive score was taken to lie between 26 – 44 and a negative score was any score less than 26. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare attitude scores

for males (M=27.63, SD=3.44) and females (M=28.7, SD=4.09). There was a significant difference p=.025 and the magnitude of the difference was small (eta squared=0.02). An Anova was conducted to compare attitude scores across class groups. No significant differences were found between class grouping p=.983. Table 2. illustrates the attitude scores for each of the class groupings. It can be seen from the table that the least positive attitude score was a child in junior and senior class group (16) and the most positive score was from a child in the first and second class group (44). These findings support previous findings such as those from Trudeau and Shephard (2005) who highlighted that 'most young children have a very positive attitude towards PE' (p.89).

Class Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation ±	Range
Junior & Senior Infants	52	28.19	3.8	16-36
First & Second	59	28.32	4.2	22-44
Third & Fourth	58	28.08	3.8	19-37
Fifth & Sixth	83	28.08	3.5	22-37
Total	252	28.16	3.8	16-44

Table 2. Total attitude score for children

Limitations

There has been conflicting evidence for reliability of parents' reporting on behalf of their children even though in this case they are completing the questionnaire with their child. Some researchers have indicated that parents are reliable reporters (Burdette *et al*. 2004; Taylor *et al.* 2009) while other have concluded that parents over report (Bender *et al*. 2005; Krishnaveni *et al*. 2009).

Not all Irish primary physical education programmes are the same therefore the results of this case study may not be generalisable, however, it is possible to learn from this research and assume that there are some similarities with other schools. Even within the school there may be variation in teachers' physical education programmes. Another limitation of this study is that the nature and purpose of the study school's physical education programme was not defined. The parents were simply asked about their attitude towards their child's physical education programme.

Conclusion

Primary physical education has on the one hand been seen as important for benefits such as health, fitness, exercise, social interaction and skill development however, on the other hand it can be absent in practice and under-researched which does not help justify its presence in the curriculum (lisahunter, 2006). According to Sheehy (2011) the influence of parents over policy makers, other parents, and their children's attitudes in the promotion of primary physical education cannot be ignored.

In this study which explored the attitudes of parents and their children towards their child's school's physical education programme, both parents' and children's attitudes (both cognitive and affective components) are positive. If parents already have a belief that physical education is important then we just need to inform them as to what it is rather than convince them of its merits. If we want parents to support their child's learning in physical education and be involved in the promotion of their child's physical activity, they need to know what their child is learning and the activities they participate in during physical education.

Children reported physical education as fun and enjoyable although over almost two thirds reported that they were better at other subjects. Parents in the study

felt that physical education was not valued enough in the school due to the lack of time given to the subject and some teachers cancelling lessons due to children's misbehaviour. Parents felt that although team sports skills and playing team sports was part of the school's physical education programme the school should be doing more of these types of activities along with health and fitness activities. They felt that teamwork and sportsmanship were important values and character development outcomes of a physical education programme. There was a lack of knowledge reported by parents around physical education programme content and parents did not seek this knowledge nor was this information shared with them unless they sought it.

To ensure parents have positive attitudes and are well informed about their child's learning in physical education, teachers and principals take professional responsibility as educators and ensure a two-way communication with parents. Teachers can play a major role by providing the right opportunities and experiences for children to improve their disposition towards physical education which may in turn help improve attitude towards physical education (Silverman and Subramaniam 1999). Teachers must encourage children to share with their parents what they did in physical education lessons and parents must ensure they seek this information in order to have a holistic view of their child's learning across the cognitive, affective and physical domains. Ways to ensure parents support their child learning in physical education need to be explored. There are a number of suggestions to help with the sharing of this information, already being used, such as: understanding parental contexts and communicating accordingly; using physical education associations and advocacy for the subject; displaying school physical education and physical activity policies on the school's websites; advertising the physical education programme on the school newsletter with photographs showing the children participating in

particular activities; using ‘class dojo’ or similar web based sharing platforms to share photographs of each weeks activities which can be used to prompt discussions about physical education activity at home and hosting information evenings and invitations to ‘come and watch a PE lesson’ have also proved useful in some schools. These and other methods need to be examined and best practice shared amongst teachers and schools.

Certain features of the curriculum such as dance and, gymnastics were not valued by parents in this study nor were they deemed important skills to be developed. All strands of the curriculum need to be advocated for and any perceived confusion which may exist around these areas and their inclusion in the curriculum needs to be alleviated. Parents view that sport is seen as synonymous with physical education, must be challenged and the view that physical education has a separate identity which sport is part of must be advocated for.

Although the parents’ responses have been shared here, further research needs to be carried out to explore how and where these ‘factual ideas’ originate; and the behavioural component which determines how one reacts towards physical activity and physical education also needs further exploration to ensure that parents and their children react positively towards all aspects of physical education and physical activity. This study focused on attitude (affective and cognitive) alone, without investigating how they predict an outcome (behaviour). A critical next step in this line of research is to gather data on the children’s physical education lesson content and the extent of their engagement and participation levels to determine the relationship between parents’ and children’s attitudes and their actual physical education participation behaviour.

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