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Irish Primary Teachers' Perspectives into the Teaching of Physical Education: Exploring the Games Strand and the Factors that Influence the Teaching Methodologies and Approaches in Current Classrooms

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Irish Primary Teachers' Perspectives into the Teaching of Physical Education:
Exploring the Games Strand and the Factors that Influence the Teaching
Methodologies and Approaches in Current Classrooms

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Abstract

The PE strand unit Games engages with the student's instinct to play. Using a mixed methods approach and purpose sampling, Irish primary school teachers were surveyed (N=22) and interviewed (N=2) for the purpose of acquiring the primary data. Findings were analysed thematically and interpreted using PP. Perspectives of the primary school teachers of PE in the classroom; their knowledge of and application of the Games Strand and teaching approaches used were investigated. Findings identify the Games Strand as the dominant strand with CL and direct teaching used in approaches; effective implementation being under the influence of many factors i.e., self-confidence, misunderstandings, access to external facilitators and resources including CPD training.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CL: Collaborative Learning

COSI : The Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative

CPD : Continuous Professional Development

DES: Department of Education and Skills

HSE: Health Service Executive Ireland

IPS : Irish Primary School

IPSC: Irish Primary School Curriculum

MWMO: Move Well Move Often

NCCA: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

O&AA: Outdoor and Adventure Activity

PDST: Professional Development Service for Teachers

PE: Physical Education

PP: Pragmatism Philosophy

PSC: Primary School Curriculum

Chapter One – Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study sought to explore the perspectives of Irish primary school teachers based on their own experience and approach to PE teaching. During the background research and process of planning the research approach it was noted that limited data is available within the Irish context based on PE teaching and methodologies. The Irish Primary PE Association (IPPEA) is an 'association dedicated to heightening awareness of PE issues in primary schools' (Irish Primary PE, nd). This is a small association in comparison to other countries such as Australia and the UK where national groups have been developed with their main priority to be developing and improving the teaching of PE (Achpher, 2023). The games strand of the IPSC was chosen as it is multi-faceted and includes skill development, application and creating games. All three strand units require varying levels of support, approaches, and development (NCCA, 1999; Thorburn, 2011). This research incorporates an online survey completed on Google Forms and two short in person face-to-face interviews conducted with fully qualified teachers who are currently teaching in mainstream classrooms.

1.2 Origin of the Dissertation

The idea for this research area and topic stems from the researcher's passion for PE and physical activity which is influenced by the Bachelor of Science degree completed and having spent a number of years working in the Sports Performance and Injury Prevention industry. The ability to link previous experience of working with youth injury prevention programmes over a number of years has influenced the researcher's outlook into how children progress and develop their gross motor skills and their functional movement abilities. During the teacher training period the researcher spent two face-to-face days actively learning how to approach and teach PE to all age groups using the IPSC. This was a limited period for a broad and multi-faceted curriculum which has six different strand units. Throughout periods of substitute teaching and compulsory work placement the researcher observed likeness amongst primary school teachers using similar approaches

and games. The researcher was frequently asked for advice due to prior coaching background and expertise held by the researcher. This led to the researcher wanting to learn more about how PE is approached, what teachers' perceptions and reasoning for the PE lessons they teach and the overall teaching of PE in schools throughout the country.

1.3 Background to the Project

The primary focus of this research is on the Games strand of the IPS PE curriculum as this is the most broad and multi-faceted strand and literature suggests it is the strand which is engaged with most throughout the academic year. The Games Strand Unit incorporates many elements of skill development, traditional Irish games and educating children on rules of the games.

PE in school is frequently a child's first encounter with physical activity and education. Educational research frequently suggests that teachers can have both positive and negative impacts on a child's perspective and willingness to engage in subjects. With worrying levels of childhood obesity and lack of physical activity amongst children at an all-time high the research aimed to research teachers' perspectives on the teaching methodologies and approaches, and which were considered the most effective to use within current classrooms and whether there are any similarities or thematic patterns from the data for challenges or perspectives.

1.4 Dissertation Layout

The structure of this paper follows this chapter as introduction into the research (Section 1.0); the second chapter is a review of literature in relation to the topic of PE and the games strand (Section 2.0). The third chapter outlines the methodology used in this research including the research paradigm, methodology, research methods, samples and participants and it approaches the ethical issues surrounding the research (Section 3.0). The fourth chapter analyses and discusses the findings from the data collected. It is an in-depth critical analysis of the findings (Section 4.0). The fifth chapter is the discussion of findings. It is an in-depth critical analysis of the data and relate them to previously specified research questions (Section 5.0). The final chapter draws together the main

conclusions reached from data collected and findings from the previous chapters. Limitations of the entire project will be discussed in this chapter (Section 6.0).

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter provides an insight and reasoning into how the researcher developed the aims, purpose, and rationale for this research project. It has stated the origin and background of the project using the previous experience of the researcher to guide the topic. The layout and structure of the following chapters has been stated. The following chapters will provide clarity, reasoning and showcase the data and findings for this project.

Chapter 2- Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This study sought to explore the perspectives of the Irish primary school teacher in relation to the Games strand of the Physical Education (PE) curriculum and the teaching methodologies used to support this teaching. There is an increasing focus on curricular reform to reflect the societal and educational changes since the 1999 Primary School Curriculum (PSC) was introduced in Ireland. This chapter will outline the Department of Education and Skills (DES) curriculum framework and key features of the Games Strand and the proposed teaching approaches used in Irish classrooms. It will briefly compare the Irish context with international PE curriculum frameworks and research into their teaching approaches.

2.2 A Critique of The Role of Physical Education in the DES Curriculum

DES defined PE as ‘activities taught as part of the curriculum [taught] within class time where the emphasis is on learning’ (DES,2012). The PE subject is just one of twelve subjects which makes up the PSC. It is unique due to the ‘focus on the body and on physical experience and is an integral part of the educational process’ (NCCA,1999). It is based on a set of key principles decided upon during the 1999 curriculum reform (NCCA,1999; Flanagan,2014). The emphasis is that the child experiences a broad and balanced curriculum with exposure to new skills. The subject also provides learning opportunities through functional movement development, education on healthy life choices and through social interactions (Costello and Warne, 2020). DES has advised that 60 minutes is allocated weekly to this subject across all year levels in primary schools (NCCA,1999). This lesson is often completed in one sixty-minute lesson or two thirty-minute sessions (Ní Chróinín and Cosgrave, 2013). This sixty minutes is not to be mistaken for an hour of daily moderate intensity exercise which is advised for children aged between six to eighteen years old (HSE,2016). Results provided from Costello and Warne’s (2020) research has suggested that approximately 35% of children are getting the full sixty minutes of PE during the school week, with the average actually approximately forty-six minutes.

PE plays a key role in the promotion of a healthy active lifestyle, the development of both fine and gross motor skills (NCCA, 1999; Clohessy, 2017). Through developing these aspects of the whole student, it has been found to support academic success across other subjects (Bailey, 2006). There is also opportunity for integration with other curricular subjects which the DES encourages (NCCA,1999). For many children, the physical education subject is their first introduction into learning about physical activity, how to live a healthy active life and develop the skills linked with physical activity. It is where primary school children learn where and how to be physically active (Fletcher and Mandigo, 2012). Physical activity and education have been found to have psychological, social and wellbeing benefits and as well as preventing longer term injuries. There is a difference between physical activity and PE. This is important to note at the beginning of this research. Physical activity is ‘an all-encompassing term which includes physical education, sport, play ad activity undertaken for enjoyment or health or performance enhancing purposes’ (DES,2012). The desired outcome of the PE curriculum is that children will be enabled to develop broad and balanced social, personal, and physical skills.

PE as a subject has the potential to educate and reach every child through its implementation on a weekly basis on the school timetable (NCCA, 1999; Flanagan, 2014). By having a positive experience with PE within these formative years in primary school, there is the potential to positively influence attitudes, approaches, and commitment to healthy physical lives in the longer term (Fletcher and Mandigo,2012; Clohessy, 2017) According to recent research released by the Health Service Executive (HSE, 2020) one quarter of children aged four to sixteen years old are considered overweight in Ireland. This statistic was identified through The Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI) spanning a period from 2018 to 2019 (HSE, 2020). Therefore, the PE curriculum can provide the learning opportunities on how to live a healthy active lifestyle and encourage lifestyle behaviours through play and enjoyment (Bailey, 2006). A positive educative experience leads to children wanting to continue and seek more education on the matter (Ní Chróinín et al., 2021).

2.3 A Theoretical Research Critique of the DES Curriculum Framework

There are many factors which influence the teaching of PE in schools such as school resources and facilities, teachers' attitudes and experience and competency, children's attitude and motivation, the weather, health and safety and also the allocation of external specialist teachers (Clohessy, 2017; Mangione et al., 2020). These are all elements which need to be considered while discussing the PE curriculum in the Irish context. The Move Well Move Often (MWMO) teacher guidelines and documents have identified other potential areas of difficulties and details possible support strategies which can be implemented (PDST, 2017).

2.3.1 A Critique of the 'Games' Strand within the Irish PE Curriculum

The Games strand is one division of the physical education curriculum which 'fosters the student's natural instinct for play' (NCCA, 2009). It is difficult to clearly define what exactly the games strand is within the curriculum as it has three sub-units with various aims and objectives (Ward and Griggs, 2011; Ward, 2014; Kirk, 2009). The DES curriculum guidelines set out clear objectives and provide a variety of examples as to how to meet curriculum aims and how to focus on them (NCCA, 1999). Despite this information being made available it does not specify the teaching methods to be used (NCCA, 1999); it is up to the professional knowledge of the teacher to choose the most suitable approach. Although the DES has stated that five strands should be explored on an annual basis, one particular research has found that 55.3% of the allocated PE time for the week was spent completing elements of the games strand (Broderick and Shiel, 2000; Kinchin, MacPhail and Ní Chróinín, 2012). Research has suggested that the games strand is the most popular strand to teach with others often neglected (Costello & Warne, 2020). *The Proceedings from the Third Physical Activity and Youth Sports Forum (2008)* report that the majority of teachers (97%) interviewed feel confident teaching games (Flanagan, 2014).

The games unit is multi-faceted in nature which consists of three strand units which vary from specific skill development, application of said skills through playing and creating games; a unit also exists which concentrates on the understanding and appreciation of games. The 'skill development unit' supports the objective of '*sending, receiving, and travelling*' requires children to develop motor skills based on ball handling, kicking skills and practise carrying and striking skills (NCCA, 1999; Flanagan, 2014). The unit of '*creating and*

playing games' concentrates on creating and developing games individually, in pairs or in small groups. There is also the possibility to play small-sided versions of games and playground games. It attempts to connect the practices of skills developed with the application in games. The purpose of these elements allows for problem solving, decision-making and creativity (O' Connor, Alfrey and Payne, 2011). Throughout a series of lessons, the student can progress from skill acquisition and learning to application and finally performance, showing the process of learning (Kirk, 2009; Ward, 2014).

The DES encourages the teaching and promotion of the traditional games (Cosgrave, 2006; Mangione et al., 2020). GAA plays a vital role in communities. Therefore, school location or particular local expectation this can influence the promotion of GAA within schools (Mangione et al., 2020; Ní Chróinín & O'Brien, 2019). Within the Irish context hurling, Gaelic football, soccer, basketball and rugby sporting associations have dedicated games development and promotion officers to encourage and teach their particular sport to school children. The various sporting bodies have created learning and teaching resources to help the generalist teacher approach their respective sports and skills which are available online to educators (Scoilnet, nd). There is a tendency within the Irish PE context to create lessons using these sports as a focus which can become quite competitive and discourage others from participating. Subsequently, such emphasis can cause exclusion amongst students who lack skills or confidence in these areas. The focus on competitive sports is not unique to the Irish setting as similar trends have been identified in the USA, UK and Australia (Kirk,2000; Kirk, 2009; Ward, 2014). The UK primary PE curriculum is 'sports dominated by traditional games that are not reflective of pupils' needs or the wider movement culture outside of school.'

2.4 Influences of Teacher's Competencies of PE teaching

A teacher's perspective and attitude towards teaching certain subjects can be influenced by a variety of factors. According to recent reports, PE has a low subject status amongst teachers in the Irish primary school context (Harris, Cale, Musson 2011; Costello and Warne 2020).

Costello and Warne (2020) completed a four-week fundamental motor skill intervention programme with children and found that it was teachers' confidence in the area which causes issues to arise. Frank and Miller (2017) study based on four hundred pre-service

Australian teachers discovered that teachers revert to pedagogies and methods that they were exposed to in school rather than implement the new knowledge learnt. Teachers have stated that 'they feel they have only received an introduction into PE' during their initial teacher education courses (Harris, Cale, and Musson 2011). One notable statistic was that 66% of Irish primary teachers from 2003 -2007 believed that they required continuous professional development in the area of PE. (Harris, Cale and Musson, 2011). Although this study was based in the UK similar trends have been found in Ireland (Harris, Cale, and Musson, 2011). Certain continuous professional development (CPD) courses address difficulties whether it be pedagogical, inclusion, assessment or differentiation amongst children (Harris, Cale, and Musson, 2011). Currently, it is the generalist class teacher who teaches the PE lessons in Ireland who may have completed either a Bachelor of Primary Education undergraduate degree or Professional Masters in Primary Education. The average time spent on the PE component throughout this initial training period is on average 38- 40 hours (Ní Chróinín and Cosgrave, 2013). This time is relatively minimal in comparison to other core areas. There is a question whether initial training can impact the quality of subsequent teaching and learning?

2.4.1 Generalist vs Specialist teacher for Primary PE curriculum

PE should be an integral part of children's school learning (Kirk, 2015). Physical literacy is just as important as numeracy and literacy emphasised in other curriculum subjects. The elements of the current PE curriculum allow children to be exposed to a broad and balanced range of activities. Although there are many challenges with the curriculum, teachers understand the importance of the subject and aim to provide suitable lesson to the students (Frank and Miller,2017). In the Irish context it is the class teacher who predominantly delivers the class PE lesson. However, some schools employ a specialist PE teacher to implement certain areas such as the Aquatics and Gymnastics strand (Flanagan, 2014). Research suggests that the primary teacher is the most suitable to teach the child centred curriculum due to their professional knowledge (Mangione et al., 2020) and meeting the requirements set by 'The Teaching Council' in Ireland (Clohessy, 2017). The generalist class teacher understands their students' abilities and is familiar with learning styles and routines. The classroom teacher can therefore approach and implement the universal design for

learning pedagogy to suit the class needs. (Coulter et al., 2009; Fletcher and Mandigo, 2012).

It is becoming more frequent that a specialist teacher, mentor or sports coach is employed to deliver certain aspects of the curriculum (Mangione et al., 2020; Ní Chróinín & O' Brien, 2019). These sports coaches are often specialists of a particular sport and are employed without prior background knowledge of the curriculum objectives. Mangione et al., (2020) suggests that there are advantages and disadvantages to these specialist coaches with the core focus on 'upskilling' the children. Teachers have reported that educators should be provided with the opportunity to observe, engage and upskill with these specialist external coaches (Griggs, 2007; Kinchin, MacPhail and Ní Chróinín, 2012). Similar benefits of 'upskilling' have been reported in New Zealand, UK, and Australia (Mangione et al., 2020). Research undertaken by Kinchin, MacPhail and Ní Chróinín as far back as 2012 has identified the concerns expressed by teachers with regards to the lack of specialist PE teachers within the Irish system.

2.5 Teaching Methodologies / Approaches/ Strategies in PE

The process of understanding and learning is often influenced by the teaching methods used throughout the lesson. Children are unique and learn through a variety of approaches. Quality and delivery vary due to the teacher's own abilities, knowledge and confidence (Broderick and Shiel, 2000). The PE curriculum documents set out the content aims and objectives through various strand units; however, it does not specify how to approach these lessons. Teachers are advised to approach the PE curriculum as units of work over five-to-six-week periods frequently referred to as 'blocks' (Kinchin, MacPhail and Ní Chróinín, 2012).

The PE teacher guidelines (NCCA,1999) provide details on a variety of approaches to be used during the strands. There is an importance in choosing the most suitable teaching approach with the flexibility to integrate and use a variety of methods (Ní Chróinín et al., 2021). The aim is to choose pedagogies which can encourage and promote long term participation and understanding of PE (Slade, Martin, and Watson, 2019; Ní Chróinín et al., 2021). 'One of the keys to the successful teaching of physical education is the use of a broad range of approaches and methodologies' (pg. 42, NCCA,1999).

According to the NCCA and DES there are three main teaching methods which are deemed most suitable approaches within the PE curriculum (NCCA, 1999). Although, Jess, Atencio and Thorburn (2011) advocated that 'there is no one way to teach games'. The direct teaching method, the guided discovery approach and integration with other subjects have been stated as 'particularly appropriate' by the NCCA (2007). These are what the DES deemed appropriate when creating the 1999 curriculum. However, the purpose of this research is to determine whether teachers are using or deem other teaching methodologies more effective or necessary to teach games. These approaches demonstrate the significant role the teacher plays in the learning as the educator specifically determines what information is being relayed to the students (Kirk, 2012). In comparison to other subjects within the PSC there is limited research in relation to which teaching methodology is most effective, suitable or even useful for the PE curriculum. The official documents provided for teachers for children with Mild Learning Difficulties (NCCA, 2007) extend the information given in the NCCA (1999) curriculum documents. Alongside the direct teaching, guided discovery and integrated approach this document has stated that the didactic approach, teacher demonstration, peer tutoring, role modelling and active group work can also be effective when teaching PE (NCCA, 2007; NCCA,1999; Ward, 2014; Kirk, 2005).

International researchers have developed and trialled a range of teaching approaches and concepts such as Teaching Games for Understanding (Bunker and Thorpe, 1982), Game Centred Learning (Slade, Martin, and Watson, 2019). These initiatives have been developed to guide and facilitate a structured PE lesson for teachers. Similarly, in Ireland the PDST have developed two PE programmes; the Primary School Sports Initiative (PSSI) and the Move Well Move Often programme (MWMO) (2017). The PSSI programmes are specific lessons created for each strand at each class level. There are several lessons which progress on one another. These lessons have specific teaching points which detail the lesson objectives and how a teacher should approach them. The MWMO programme is meant to complement the PE curriculum with the primary focus being on functional movement skill development. This programme has been devised in conjunction with the PDST as according to research the physical literacy of Irish children falls short of what is necessary.

2.6 Conclusion

The key focus of this research is on the teaching methodologies used within the Irish PSC PE curriculum and more precisely the Games Strand, however as there is limited information based on this specific topic, relevant research based on the UK and various Australian systems have also been explored. In summary, the educator plays a focal role in the implementation of PE skills and concepts. Therefore, to gain their perspective on current teaching methodologies in the classroom may provide insight and information for future curriculum framework reform.

The existing literature available on this topic raised the following research questions:

1. Is the games strand of the PSC PE curriculum the dominant strand?
2. Which teaching approach(es) are most frequently applied to support student learning of the Games Strand?
3. Which factors have an influence on teachers when teaching PE and more specifically the Games Strand?

Chapter Three - Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will give an outline of the methodology and research methods utilised to conduct this research project. It provides rationale for the research approach selected and also includes a description of data collection; the instruments used and sampling of selected population. Ethical considerations are also discussed and considered within this chapter. It addresses the limitations of the research design and methodology which may be taken into consideration.

3.2 Research Paradigm

Determining the type of project to be completed required the researcher to compare between a *positivist*, *interpretivism* and a *pragmatism* approaches. In order to determine which best suited the research approach each possibility was compared. 'Paradigms are conceptual and practical "tools" that are used to solve specific research problems' (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

Positivism approach used mainly quantitative methodologies such as surveys, observations. The analysis is based on descriptive statistics and measures what is verifiable.

Interpretivism approach is on the qualitative elements of research interviews, diaries, observations however the truth is context dependent and solely subjective (Wagner, Kawulich and Garner, 2012). The *pragmatic* approach combines both quantitative and qualitative creating stronger rigour of data improving validity, reliability and trustworthiness based on the sample and participants selected for the research. It was chosen as it was best suited to find answers for the emerging research questions (Morgan, 2008; Wagner, Kawulich and Garner, 2012).

3.3 Selection of Methodology

This study aims to explore the teaching methodologies applied to the teaching of the Games Strand in the IPSC PE curriculum and to identify the perspectives of teachers and the factors which influence their teaching approach.

3.3.1 Mixed Methodology

A mixed methodology research design was reasoned most suitable to adequately approach the research questions considered throughout this investigation. Educational research is complex and elusive (Ponce & Pagán Maldonado, 2015; Rolls & Relf, 2006). Therefore, to draw conclusions, inferences and to make the research more reliable the combination of both quantitative and qualitative elements allows depth of research. This structure of research follows the pragmatism philosophical tradition relating knowledge of the world to experiences and practical exploration (Vanderstraeten and Biesta, 2006). Both quantitative and qualitative research methods have strengths and weaknesses (Johnson & Christenson, 2008; Rolls & Relf, 2006). Quantitative research is completed using specific more tightly controlled conditions with a focus on numerical evidence with the aim of drawing clear conclusions (Coyne, 2016). Qualitative research is discovery-orientated and its objective is to discover how people experience aspects of life and provide deeper insight into their background and perspectives (Newby, 2010). Interpreting data and determining the 'hidden meaning' is an element of qualitative research which requires reflexivity by the researcher during the gathering and analysis stages of data collection (Ivey, 2023).

The use of the mixed methodology approach allowed for data to be interpreted and integrated to cross validate statements or findings within a single study (Shorten and Smith, 2017; Coyne, 2016). The results of one method of research extends or compliments the results obtained from the other. Mixed methodology research draws on potential strengths from both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The study was of complementary design using parallel phases of data collection and integrated during data analysis given equal priority. The data are integrated during analysis and interpreted to determine whether a lack of or strength in convergence amongst data.

3.4 Research Methods

This section will address the reasoning for choice of data collection and determining which instruments were suitable in this research.

3.4.1 Choosing the Correct Instruments

When choosing instruments to suit both quantitative and qualitative areas of research it is important to use instruments which are reliable, valid and have the potential to be

compared and/ or integrated with data from both aspects (Ponce and Pagán-Maldonado, 2015). Choosing instruments which contain all of these aspects contribute to successful studies. For this research, online questionnaires were selected for the quantitative aspect of research and short semi-structured interviews for qualitative. Both elements of this research were directed at Irish primary school mainstream teachers.

3.4.2 Questionnaires

Questionnaires are the most popular form of data collection in quantitative research (Rolls & Relf, 2006). A structured questionnaire is created by the researcher to target the sample or population based on required information. This data is then collected, coded and analysed to general statistical data based on the research questions in the form of graphs and tables. This research was completed using an online survey platform which has many advantages such as being economical, time efficient and can target a wider population in a conventional manner. The use of online questionnaires is far more beneficial as data is collected and can be displayed using visuals almost immediately in comparison to written questionnaires which need transferring of data and analysis prior to gathering clear understanding. The online questionnaire was shared using an online link provided to principals of the selected schools and used to ascertain teachers' perspectives about the teaching of PE and in particular the Games Strand. Consent was obtained prior to participation as Kanuka and Anderson (2007) stated this is a concern when using e-questionnaires.

3.4.3 Semi-Structured Research Interviews

Qualitative research is beneficial in understanding in depth the complex issues about people's perceptions and beliefs of specific topics. Educational researchers have stated the benefits of completing research interviews in a comfortable space where participants are willing to disclose and share their responses (Newby, 2010; Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2015).

To ensure this research was conducted with rigour and to allow for triangulation of data and determine any patterns a semi-structured interview was selected for the qualitative element. The semi-structured interview was selected to enhance and corroborate the data collected through the online questionnaires. This format of interview involved using a topic guide to structure the conversation however there is an allowance for the interview to go off-script. The dialogical nature of this process according to Loxley et al. (2009) allows for the

interviewer to 'ask probing questions or to seek clarification or compare experiences and thoughts' (Coyne, 2016).

The interviews were conducted in a location and time which suited the selected participants. The interviews lasted between 20 - 25 minutes and recorded using two audio-recording devices to ensure clear and secure data was retrieved. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim by the researcher. A thematic approach to analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was followed and included highlighting key words and phrases which were coded and compared across both interviews.

3.5 Piloting of Research

Both the qualitative and quantitative elements of the research project were piloted in a small-scale study. A questionnaire was provided and interview conducted for piloting with non-participating school candidates. This allowed the researcher to be provided with feedback on clarity of questioning and time commitment. Several questions on the questionnaire were edited for clearer comprehension. Elements of the topic guide were changed to allow open ended questioning on certain topics and flow of discussion moving from one section to another.

3.6 Population, Sample, Participants

Primary School Teachers were chosen from four selected schools of both urban and rural context. This study was carried out between February 2023 and June 2023. The schools were selected based on (a) their location within reach of the researcher for interview and data collection purposes and (b) the prior working relationship the researcher had with the principal to allow research to take place. Five mainstream teachers from each of the four schools were sent the online questionnaire to fill out within a 48-hour period. The total number of participants (N=24) to receive the questionnaire allowed for discrepancies or non-completion of the questionnaire. Participants had a variety of professional working experience.

Mixed Sampling was used during this case-study to effectively gather data required. Non-probability *convenience (purposive)* sampling was chosen for the semi-structured interviews due to researcher requiring access to the teachers in their classroom and for participants to be available to complete it (Mesa et al., 2016). Probability sampling (*stratified*) using online

questionnaires was used for the quantitative element of the research. Four schools were selected and the school principals determined the participants selected.

3.7 Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was sought and granted from Hibernia College's Ethics Committee before carrying out this research project. The research process was undertaken following the ethical principles outlined in the Hibernia College Ethics Committee guidelines.

In line with the BERA (2018) (British Education Research Association) GDPR guidelines. All participants were required to declare consent prior to completing the online survey; the principal signed a consent forms (Appendix I); and participants of the in-person interviews signed the appropriate consent forms (Appendix III) prior. Participants were provided with research and participation information with the purpose of research clearly stated.

Participants had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research, without any negative consequence. There were no additional incentives provided to ensure integrity and trustworthiness. Confidentiality of participants was maintained through the use of pseudonyms (T1 & T2). Data will be kept securely for a period of one year after collection and stored in password protected folders.

3.8 Limitations of the Methodology

One of the limitations in relation to this research relates to the sampling and population scope. The researcher used convenience sampling structure for the purpose of the qualitative semi-structured interviews. These research interviews were conducted with persons who were available and willing to participate in the locality. The online questionnaires were shared with four school principals in the general Southeast of Ireland location. The researcher aimed to include various categories however due to the small-scale nature of the research this was not possible. It was then the duty of those participating principals to select five members of staff to complete the online questionnaire using the link supplied. It needs to be acknowledged that there may have been bias from principals and this must also be taken into consideration throughout the research process.

Both elements of the mixed methods research require teachers to respond to open and closed questions based on their own personal perspectives. The research was designed to focus on objective markers with specific, clear and focussed questions. However, there are

elements which would be subjective to the person and personal preferences may not be interpreted by each participant in the same way. Whilst the findings are the perspectives of a small group the aim was to gather and analyse information which may benefit future teacher training in similar areas.

3.9 Data Analysis

Throughout the research process the researcher continued to review and analyse new research on PE and the Games strand.

The quantitative and qualitative stages of data collections and analysis were conducted in parallel phases with each requiring different approaches. During the analysis phase the online questionnaires were analysed separately and the research interview required script to be transcribed and common themes found in comparison to one another (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was completed by examining the data collected and categorising them based on themes and patterns (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2011).

The integration of the quantitative and qualitative research allowed results to be analysed to discover emerging themes and important information. This process of parallel analysis allowed the researcher to move from specific statements and observation to more general statements (Dunne, nd).

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter includes and outlines the methodology used throughout this research project. It provides and outlines the details relating to the implementation of the research format and outlines the data collection instruments selected and used for this project. It references and reflects on the sampling, the participants, triangulation reliability throughout the data collection and research period. It also details the ethical considerations which were required and limitations involved with the methodology. Through reflective practice and consideration for other possible approaches this research design was chosen in order to achieve optimum results and reflect the purpose of the research questions and future use of the data.

Chapter Four – Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will examine the data and information gathered using a mixed method approach as described in Chapter Three. The aim of this chapter is to explore the research question (below) as previously proposed:

1. Is the games strand of the PSC PE curriculum the dominant strand?
2. Which teaching approach(es) are most frequently applied to support student learning of the Games Strand?
3. Which factors have an influence on teachers when teaching PE and more specifically the Games strand?

Descriptive profiles and information based on the participants is presented within this chapter. The research used a pragmatic approach to data collection using online questionnaires to gather quantitative data from mainstream primary school teachers (N=24). Two of the participants who were surveyed were excluded due to not meeting the inclusion criteria. The qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in the classroom and used to gain further understanding into the experiences and perspectives of two current mainstream teachers. The data from the qualitative is used to provide further depth and understanding of the data collected through surveys.

4.2 Descriptive Profiles of Classroom Teachers and Practice

All participants (N=22) were current mainstream primary school teachers with professional teaching experience ranging from 2 full years to 28 years (mode, 6 years). Interviewee 1 (T1) had thirty-four years' experience and Interviewee 2 (T2) had eight years of experience.

Of the surveyed participants (N=22), 68.2% completed the Bachelors Degree in Education with 31.8% of participants completing a two-year Professional Masters in Education. Both interviewees (T1 & T2) had completed the Bachelor's Degree in Education.

Figure 4.0 (below) indicates that all class levels are represented, providing insight into the current practices across all class levels. T1 interviewee was teaching second class and T2 interviewee was teaching 6th class.

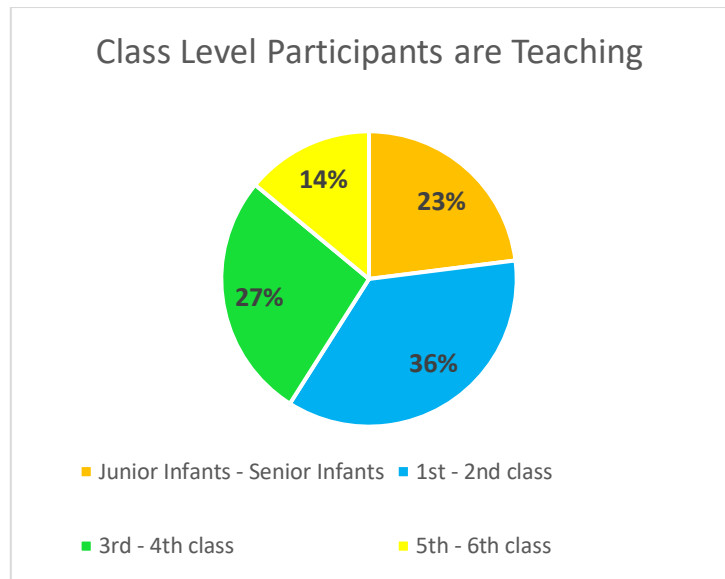


Fig 4.0

4.2.1 Duration and frequency of PE in classrooms

Figure 4.1 (below) represents the data from surveys for the total duration of minutes spent weekly on PE in the participants current classrooms. 18.2% of teachers are spending more than 60 minutes weekly; in comparison to the 68.2% who spend 46-60 minutes. In an interesting finding one participant (P17) stated that they spend 16-30 minutes weekly, this is half of the time allocated by DES. On further analysis, P17 has stated that they strongly disagree that their school has adequate resources to teach the games strand.

A statistic of 55% of participants complete two PE lessons weekly while the remaining 45% teach one PE lesson weekly.

T1 and T2 discussed how their PE scheduling can be determined by several external factors such as school timetabling for play space, available resources and scheduling of other subjects.

‘at the moment it is two half hour lessons for the hall, however when and as the weather improves, we can go outside and do one hour lesson’ (T2).

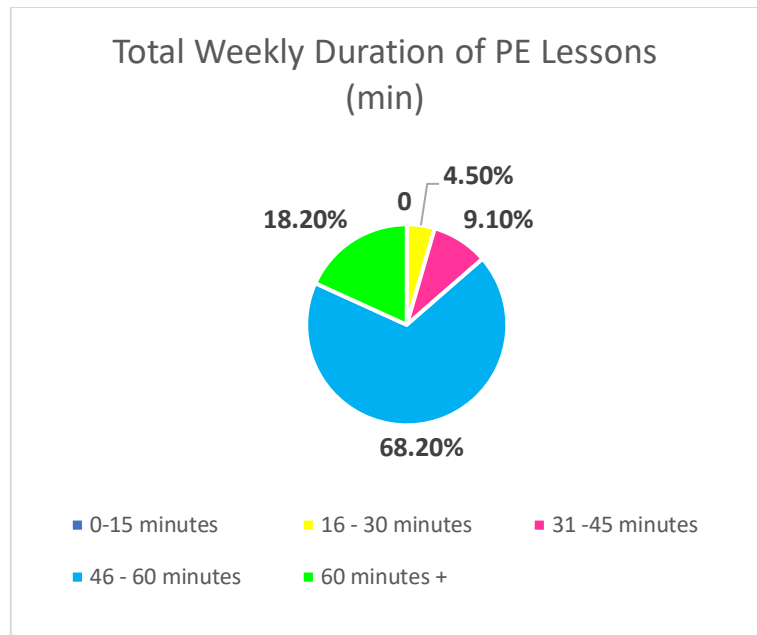


Fig 4.1

Another interesting outcome was that often in term three of the school year many external coaches attend the PE sessions and blocks of PE lessons are frequently completed in a short period. It was suggested that this may make up for less PE curricular time in other terms ‘so you end up doing like triple the designate time for PE in the third term and do make up for it’ (T2). It is unclear from the survey findings whether this applies to other teachers or the approach is explicit to PE scheduling.

4.3 Games Strand Frequency

It is evident that the Games Strand is the dominant strand as represented in Figure 4.2, (below) with 68.2 % of participants stating that they spend most of their time annually in this area. The remaining 31.8% of participants selected the Games Strand in combination with either Athletics or Outdoor and Adventure Activities as the strand of the PE curriculum that educators spend most time teaching over the year.

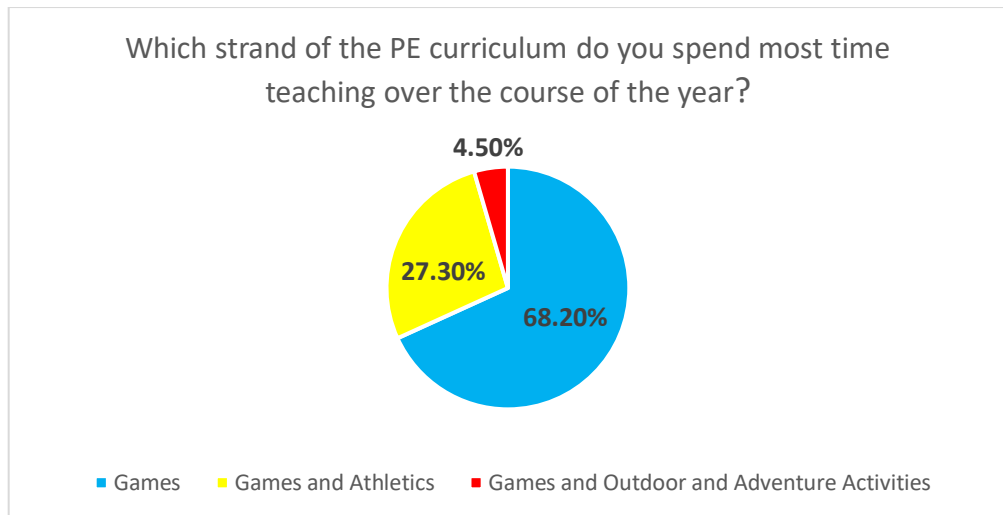


Fig. 4.2

Further insight into possible reasoning for this trend (above) was identified in the interviews with similarities emerging through answered questions. Both T1 and T2 discussed the natural tendencies of children to enjoy and engage with games, therefore making it more appealing and suited to all children. T1 discussed using the Games Strand at the beginning of the year to teach the playground games to allow children to apply them during lunchtime. Another commonality was structuring and progression of the Games Strand units was easier than other strands as specific skills are developed, progressed and applied in game scenarios. Finally, external sports teachers used to teach blocks of sports such as GAA, volleyball, hockey and Tag Rugby regularly predetermine the time allocation for PE.

4.4 Teacher Perspective and Application to the Classroom

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel competent to teach all PE strands covering the curriculum aims and objectives?	9.1 %	13.6%	36.4%	40.9%	-
I understand the curriculum objectives and aims involved with the Games Strand for the class I am teaching currently.	-	4.5 %	4.5%	54.5%	36.4%
My school has sufficient resources to teach the elements of the Games strand in PE. (i.e., outdoor area, hall, sports equipment, safety equipment)	4.5 %	9.1%	18.2%	31.8%	36.4%
<i>Development Stage</i> specific skills are incorporated into the Games Strand lessons (<u>Specified Skills - ball handling, kicking, carrying, and striking</u>)	-	4.5%	18.2%	50%	27.3%
Children engage in creating and playing games (small-sided, small groups) regularly during my PE Games Lesson	4.5%	4.5%	31.8%	36.4%	22.7%
Children are actively engaged and involved in understand games, the rule making process	-	9.1%	18.2%	54.5%	18.2%

Tab. 4.0

Table 4.0 (above) shows the results in % format based on the questions in Section 3 of the online survey (Appendix 4). The purpose of these questions was to provide nominative data of the teachers perspectives based on the research questions. The questions scaled from one to five using strongly disagree to strongly agree on the scale.

4.4.1 Overall PE curriculum objectives

A notable observation from the data based on the first question of Section 3 online-survey (Appendix *) "For many children the PE subject is their first introduction about physical activity, how to live a healthy active life and develop skills linked with physical activity". I feel competent to teach **all** PE strands covering the curriculum aims and objectives?" is that 36.4 % of participants (N=8) feel competent to teach all elements of the PE curriculum; an interesting comparison to a much lower figure of participants (at 9.1%) stating they do not feel competent.

The results from the interviews support this varied response in the questionnaire. A particular observation made by the researcher was that both participants required additional thinking time to process and read each of the elements prior to determining a 'yes' or 'no' response. This question took considerably longer to answer. A commonality was that both participants mentioned their lack of willingness or confidence to teach the Dance Strand and their apprehension to teach Gymnastics due to their own lack of competency and fear of student injury 'we were always paranoid of neck injury' (T1). It is evident there is a reliance of external teachers to support the learning of students in these strands.

4.4.2 Understanding of Games Strand Objectives

In relation to the aims and objectives of the Games Strand, there is a surprisingly a high statistic with 90.1 % of participants (N=20) agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the aims and objectives for their current class group. This is a significant observation demonstrating that teachers do consider themselves to understand the curriculum aims and objectives. However, based on information from the interviews, this statistic may not be a true reflection of the status quo. T1 and T2 teachers realised on reflection and reading of the curriculum booklet that they did not approach the games properly, missing elements or returning to what they thought was dictated by the curriculum:

'um, no. Like I definitely give it a go, but I would say I definitely don't understand even the game strand myself. Um, let alone teaching the skills' (Teacher 2).

This evidence suggests there may be a discrepancy between the understanding of the aims and objectives and the application of this knowledge into the actual PE lessons.

4.4.3 Application of Games Strand Objectives

The survey questioned the participants on the three strand units from the Games Strand: (i) Sending, receiving and travelling (skills); (ii) Creating and playing games and Understanding and (iii) appreciation of games. 77.3 % stated skill development stages are included and 72.7% stated that the implementation of the strand (and elements of it within its sub-units) involve the children in understanding and appreciation. This is a positive finding in comparison to the Creating and Playing of Games unit with only 59% of teachers stating it is used during lessons. The survey did not include time spent on each sub-unit however the interviews provided interesting differences in time length spent on skill development and application in games. From the teachers experiences' with different class levels or class groups, the level of time and detail at each stage varied:

'Like when I had junior infants you could spend 20 minutes of the 30 minutes lesson teaching a skill, that maybe a handful might actually get and then a 10 minutes of a game. Whereas with 6th class I find I lose them, they lose interest really fast. So you might spend three or four minutes going over the skills and then straight into some sort of competitive game' (Teacher 2) ;

'Just the level of skills things would be different and how long I would spend on it, infants takes a lot longer and you need to be very clear on your teaching. But, with 2nd class you could show them' (Teacher 1).

4.5 Teaching Methodologies to Support Student Learning

It was imperative that the researcher understood the teaching strategies being used during the Games Strand. The primary data presented in Figure 4.4 (below) shows the results of the question on the adopted teaching methodologies, with the participants able to select more than one teaching approach if required.

Co-operative games was the most frequently answered method with 86.4 % (N=19) of participants stating they use co-operative games; in comparison with 31.8 % (N=7) using station teaching. It is a significant statistic that 81.8 % of participants use the Direct Teaching approach to PE skills.

Class abilities and personalities were noted by both T1 and T2 as a possible determinant of teaching methodologies used. Direct instruction was used to maintain classroom control and authority by both teachers 'in general classroom management is really hard, like just to stop

the arguing' (T2) and is frequently required with large classes. The use of co-operative games was highlighted as beneficial however the level of competitiveness amongst the children can make PE more difficult to teach and retain engagement by all pupils:

'co-operative games are good, yeah. But I think sometimes the skill, once you bring in a competitive element, the skill becomes less important. So, the skills and drills get you a different result to the competition' (T1).

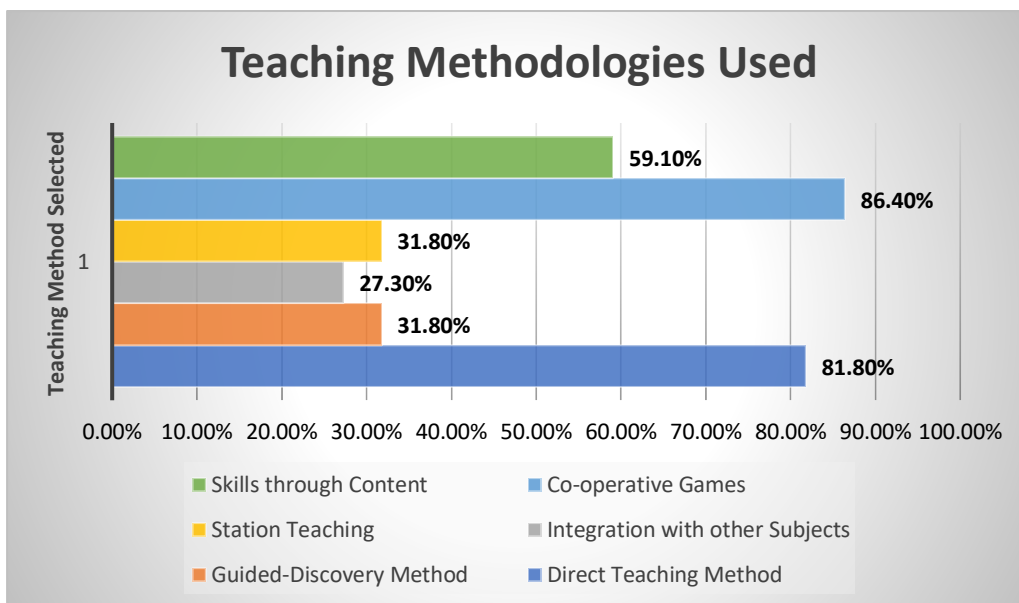


Fig 4.4

4.6 Continuous Professional Development/ Additional PE training

The findings from the survey indicated that 36% of surveyed teachers (N=8) have previously completed CPD courses or additional external training courses with a focus on either sports coaching or PE teaching during their teaching career. Some CPD courses with specific teaching and learning objectives towards the IPS PE curriculum such as 'Gaelic Games: Enhancing the delivery of PE & integration with the Curriculum'; 'Getting Active in PE' and 'Teaching and Leading Primary PE' were named. Other additional coaching courses named were the 'GAA Award 1 – GAA DOES' and the 'FAI PDP1 Coaching Course'. The significant observation from this data is that the CPD and coaching courses completed by the surveyed participants focus on the aims, objectives, skills and understanding of elements of the Games strand. No participant named courses based on other strand units.

There was a significant correlation identified during interviews with both teachers determining that their past personal sporting experience and CPD had a strong influence on how they structure and teach the Games strand rather than information learnt during their training period in college,

‘I wouldn’t know what to do or different drills to do if I didn’t have that um, kind of experience, you need to keep them busy and active but feel confident that you know what you’re doing’ (T2).

T1 had completed a number of CPD courses and relayed positive impact of them.

‘I think the courses are great because you kind of get stale and you go back to your old reliable and there’s always new strategies’.

4.7 External Facilitators of PE

100% of those surveyed stated their schools use external facilitators for blocks of PE of that 91% of them believe having an external facilitator benefits the children. Similarly, both interviewees stated that they too receive external coaches to complete often six-week blocks of particular sports with the class group.

It was obvious to the researcher that the use of external PE teachers had many benefits ‘they are just great, they are experts in the area’ (T1). Teachers reported that the children benefit through skill acquisition and learning supported by experts. They also benefit as the teacher is given the opportunity to observe and assess properly which is difficult during teacher led lessons due to management, ‘the beauty I think of the external coaches is that as a teacher you get to observe, assess...’ (T1).

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter detailed the findings of the online-survey (Appendix 4) and the interviews (Appendix 5) conducted with primary school teachers. The results detailed were related to the three research questions previously stated. Discussion and conclusions will be presented in chapter five in relation to this current research and other relevant literature.

Chapter Five – Discussion of the Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will critically discuss the findings highlighted in the previous chapter (Chapter Five) based on context of the research questions in the thesis (see section 2.6) and consensus of the wider academic published literature (as discussed in Chapter Two). This chapter is divided into sections based on the dominant and emerging themes identified within the thematic analysis of the primary data within sections 5.2 to 5.7 (below).

5.2 Frequency of Physical Education Class

The sub-sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2 (below) will discuss the findings based on the Games Strand and the frequency of it in the PE classroom of current mainstream Irish primary school classrooms.

5.2.1 PE in the classroom

DES advises that 60 minutes is spent weekly on PE teaching for all class levels at primary school level (NCCA, 1999; DES, 2012). The findings from this research indicate that 68.2% of teachers are spending 46 – 60 minutes on it weekly with 18.2% of the respondents (i.e., qualified primary teachers) spending over 60 minutes on it weekly. These results are similar to those found during Costello and Warne's (2020) research. PE plays a key role in development of gross motor skills, social skills, and promotion of a healthy active lifestyle; therefore, an alarming statistic identified was 4.5% of teachers surveyed are completing less than half the recommended time (DES, 2012). This lack of exposure to PE can influence a student's learning, understanding and appreciation of the core aims and objectives of the curriculum.

A number of factors that influence time allocated to PE were noted. Factors such as the whole school timetabling for play areas such as the hall, outdoor court area or school pitch; the availability of suitable resources for the specific class groups and also the scheduling of external facilitators can all influence PE timing (Kinchin, Mac Phail and Ní Chróinín, 2012; Ní Chróinín & O' Brien, 2019). Coulter and Woods (2012) identified similar trends throughout the research based on the Outdoor Adventure and Activities Strand (with the direct quote):

‘additional barriers include the perceived low subject status, lack of financial resources, insufficient equipment...’.

However, 68.2% of surveyed participants agreed or strongly agreed that their school has sufficient resources to teach the elements of the Games Strand. This statistic is contradicted by T1 who agreed that although it may seem that resources are available, a standard methodology may not be suitable for all class groups. Younger class groups may require soft ball or larger balls for skill development in comparison to the older groups, therefore, the resources selected should be determined by the teacher’s perspective of their own class group and needs.

5.2.2 Frequency and Exposure to the Games Strand

The data collected from the online questionnaire determined that the Games Strand is the most frequently completed strand throughout the academic year. All surveyed teachers indicated that the Games Strand on its own or in combination with athletics or O&AA are most often explored. The Games Strand is multifaceted and incorporates a variety of skills, sports and objectives. However, like the data from Costello & Warne’s (2020) research suggests that the increased frequency of the Games Strand allows for other strands to be neglected. This trend is despite the DES (1999) curriculum specifying that all strand units should be explored; T1 and T2 both stated their apprehension to teach the dance strand ‘only for the Irish dancing teacher comes in, I’d be lost’ (T2).

Possible reasons for the frequency of the Games Strand were identified during the interview process with both teachers identifying that the playground games and the possibility of creating and playing fun collaborative games made it easier to motivate and maintain engagement with the games in comparison to other strands. This is in line with the statement that the Games Strand naturally engages the child’s willingness to play (NCCA, 2017).

In addition, teachers reported that it was easier to structure and progress Games Strand lessons in comparison to other strands where they lack knowledge and ability as highlighted by Coulter & Woods (2012). Upon reflection both teachers interviewed noted that their experience with sports made the teaching of the Games Strand easier as they could

compare to what they had done previously 'you would use if for games for how to organise lessons kind of to help you aim it at the right level as well' (T2).

5.3 Teacher's Perspectives

This research required primary school teachers to provide their own perspectives following closed and open questioning format. This information gathered from current classrooms allows the findings to be reflective and practical to current classroom practices and perspectives of current teachers. A critique of the findings is summarised in sections 5.3.1 to 5.3.3, below.

5.3.1 Overall PE objectives

An interesting statistic based on teachers' perspectives of their competency to teach all the strands of the PE curriculum has highlighted that only 36.4% felt competent. This finding is not dissimilar to the literature available with Harris, Cale, and Musson (2011) stating that teachers feel they have only received an introduction to PE during their initial training period prior to entering the classroom (Fletcher & Mandigo, 2012). Similar themes were identified during the interview process with both teachers noting they remember very little about their initial training. It is no surprise that if teachers believe that they only receive basic training into the fundamentals of PE that they may therefore struggle to teach each strand in meeting the curriculum requirements.

5.3.2 Understanding of the Aims and Objectives of the Games Strand

The data obtained indicated that this cohort of teachers consider themselves to understand the Games Strand curriculum objectives. This is in line with the data provided by Flanagan (2014) with 97% of those participants being confident in teaching games. Similar research based on the outdoor and adventure activity strand by Coulter & Woods (2012) found that Irish primary school teachers (quote): 'noted that they did not have the required O&AA content knowledge, which led to lack of programme planning, material and resource provision and lack of content pedagogical knowledge'. Therefore, it is a positive finding from this research that the cohort of teachers do feel competent and confident to understand the aims and objectives of the Games Strand.

5.3.3 Application of Knowledge to the Classroom

During the interview process, it was observed that although the participants may consider themselves confident and competent to teach the Games Strand, when provided with the curriculum aims and objectives, the participants recognised that they may not actually be applying the PE curriculum objectives. Participants acknowledged that they often return to the skills and games that they are comfortable with (originating from their own previous sporting experience or teaching experience). This is comparable to the results from Frank & Miller's (2017) research of pre-service Australian teachers whereby teachers revert to what they experience in school rather than placing reliance on new knowledge. This is a common behaviour observed in educational research that prior to entering teacher training programs, people have pre-existing knowledge, experience and interpretation which organically filters into their teaching approaches (Oleson & Hora, 2013).

5.4 Teaching Methodologies to Support Student Learning

The NCCA (2007) and DES (1999) deemed the direct teaching method, the guided discovery approach and integration through other subjects to be the most suitable teaching approaches within the PE curriculum. Beni, Ní Chróinín and Fletcher (2021) completed a study on the implementation of meaningful PE lessons. One feature of the meaningful experience included social interaction which aimed to promote positive relationships and provide an opportunity for students to work together, in parallel or as a large group. The data suggests that teachers are using this approach to PE in current classrooms as 86.4% selected co-operative games as a teaching methodology used. This is a significant improvement to the group work and co-operative approach in comparison to that found by Coulter & Woods (2007) who reported teachers did not use group work in ways that promoted pupil learning.

The teachers interviewed in this case study stated that due to lack of resources, the educator is required to 'get children working together' (T1). However, it can make it more engaging for the students as it provides an opportunity for social interaction; an aspect on integration and inclusivity that was denied during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to mention that both teachers commented that although the co-operative games are effective for skill development and application, that once a competitive element is introduced into the games it can create arguments and challenges for pupil engagement and mood.

A statistic of 81.8 % of teachers are using the direct teaching method to deliver PE lessons in this case-study. In the use of this method, there is possibly a reliance on teachers to explicitly teach the technique and skill required to the students (Queensland Government, 2023). However, if teachers are not confident and/or do not understand and/or are unsure about their own ability completing these skills, how can they instruct and support children's learning effectively?

There were many reasons determined by T1 and T2 in this case-study for the use of the direct teaching method during PE lessons. One recurring topic was to maintain classroom behaviour and control. During the direct method, all students are completing or practicing a skill at the same time whilst following the same approach. This is necessary according to the teachers due to the number of pupils in current class groups and to cater for the range of abilities in the classroom.

5.6 Continuous Professional Development

It is well documented that a teachers' confidence and beliefs can influence the methodologies, structure, and approach to support student learning (Fletcher & Mandigo, 2012; Whipp et al., 2011). It is an interesting observation that the 36% of participants who had completed CPD courses or additional coaching courses, each course named was directed at the aims, objectives and sports associated with the Games Strand. These factors may contribute to the reason why classroom teachers spend most of their instructional time on PE in areas that they have feel most competent due to previous experience and learning (Fletcher & Mandigo, 2012).

It is unclear whether there is a limited scope of choice of PE CPD courses available in Ireland and for other strand units. T2 noted that it was difficult to book a place on the in-person summer CPD courses although the teacher was interested in registering an attendance.

Coulter & Woods (2007) research reported a positive improvement in teaching and understanding when teachers undertook a six-week professional development programme within the school setting. These programs provided teachers with the high-quality teaching, modelling, and resources which in turn created a positive change in student learning, however research suggests sustained support over a longer period leads to a lasting change in teacher implementation (Beni, Ní Chróinín and Fletcher, 2021).

5.7 External Facilitators in PE Mainstream Classes

This study explored the idea of external facilitators of PE in mainstream classes. Each participant of the study confirmed the use of an external facilitator for the provision of at least one strand unit from the PE curriculum. These external facilitators on average provide six-week blocks of a particular strand or sport. Bowles & O' Sullivan (2012) identified that 81% of primary schools have GAA coaches recruited for the delivery of GAA sports in Irish schools. The concepts of external or specialist teachers are not unique to Irish settings and the challenges associated are 'more similar than different to those faced internationally' (Fletcher & Mandigo, 2012; Whipp et al., 2011; Flanagan, 2014).

Although there is a continuous debate as to which teacher is most suitable to teach the child centred curriculum (Mangione et al., 2020; Morgan & Hansen, 2007), 91% of surveyed participants within this research believe the external teacher allocation to PE curriculum content benefits the learner. Another essential point to recognise is that teachers reported a benefit for class teachers alike. T1 and T2 explained that during the external facilitators time, the educator is given the opportunity to assess, observe and support children which is not usually afforded of them due to non-assisted standard classroom management and teaching time. A suggestion identified in the research of Ní Chróinín & O'Brien (2019) is that class teachers can benefit through partnership models whereby teacher collaborate to facilitate lessons and therefore not only benefit in personal professional development but also being able to implement tailored pedagogical knowledge and experience in the class.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the findings of the research in relation to the perspectives of class teachers within the Irish primary school settings. The chapter acknowledged similarities and trends with the academic published literature, in particular to an Irish context; and as previously identified in former chapters of the thesis. Furthermore, the critical analysis has provided reasoning for the quantitative and qualitative information obtained in this case-study. Chapter six will further draw together an overall conclusions from the entire study and discuss the possible limitations to the study and recommendations for future research and pedagogical practice.

Chapter Six – Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will critique and conclude the overall understanding gained from this research thesis. This study set out to investigate the perspectives of current mainstream Irish primary school teachers with the Games Strand of the IPS PE curriculum (NCCA, 1999; DES, 2007). This chapter will firstly present an overall critical summary of the findings (under section 6.2, below). The limitations of the research relating to this research will be discussed in section 6.3. Finally, the implications of the findings will be discussed in section 6.4 in relation to the future pedagogical practice and future research recommendations based on the topic.

6.2 A Critical Summary of Findings

The purpose of this research was to analyse the format and scheduling of PE lessons in current primary school classrooms, to gain a perspective and understanding of teacher's competencies and application of knowledge focussing on the Games Strand and to identify factors which influence teachers teaching approaches.

6.2.1 Games Strand Dominant Strand

The Games Strand was the dominant strand with 68.2% of teachers stating they spend most instructional PE time on this strand. This aligns with previous statistics reported within literature (Costello & Warne, 2020; . This is significant finding as NCCA (1999) suggests that all children are exposed to all strand units annually due to the various developmental skills in each unit.

6.2.2 Influential Factors

Teachers acknowledged many factors influence PE lessons and their approach to teaching – personal experience, competency, availability of external facilitators, sufficient resources and frequently the range of abilities, needs and personalities in classrooms (Beni, Ní Chróinín and Fletcher, 2021; Fletcher & Mandigo, 2012). There is considerable reliance of external facilitators to teach PE in schools with 100% of those included having external support. These external facilitators are according to the results beneficial for children and teachers alike. Various other researchers have highlighted the benefits of the external providers (Whipp et al., 2011; Mangione et al., 2020).

6.2.3 Teaching Methodologies to Support Student Learning

Positive findings in the case-study conducted were that co-operative games and collaborative learning was being implemented into an 86.4% of classrooms, higher than previously identified. There is still a reliance on teacher-centred approaches with Direct Teaching used for the Games Strand in 81.8% of primary school classrooms. This reliance of teachers to explicitly teach skills may lead to less effective teaching due to the noted lack of confidence and competence in teachers' skill level and understanding (Coulter & Woods, 2012; Fletcher & Mandigo, 2012). The use of Direct Teaching is frequently used for classroom management and safety concerns rather than being the most effective approach to skill or game being taught .

6.3 Limitations of the study

The findings are limited to the research questions determined, issues which arose during the literature review, the sample and participants selected and the views of the participants in this research. All must be considered during analysis. A mixed methodology research was employed with non-probability sampling chosen. In controlling limitations associated with this research method, piloting was completed to review transparency of questioning and to inform timing of the interviews.

The small-scale nature of this research determined that only significant trends identified during the data collection and analysis process were explored. Less dominant themes and emerging identified were not fully explored.

The pragmatic philosophical paradigm was selected for this study, this approach was selected as it fit the design required. This methodology 'holds that human actions can never be separated from the past experiences (Kaushik & Walsh,2019). Both T1 and T2 had a prior external coaching and sporting backgrounds it would be beneficial for additional interviews to gain the perspective of those teachers who may not participate in sports outside of school.

The researcher acknowledged the prospective reflexivity that the prior experience and knowledge may produce bias, thus creating a limitation. This in combination with the lack of academic studies and research will a sole focus on the Games Strand and teaching methods

required the researcher to use data which included international educational settings limits the practicality and implementation into current Irish classrooms.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research and Pedagogical Practice

Similar to the views of Coulter and Woods (2012), there is extensive research completed on the need for CPD for mainstream teachers focussing on PE. Irish primary school teachers lack the confidence, competency and understanding of how to address and approach PE lessons (Kinchin, Mac Phail and Ní Chróinín, 2012; Beni, Ní Chróinín and Fletcher, 2021) . Similar to the views of Fletcher & Mandigo (2012) there is a recommendation for longitudinal study of programmes and interventions as research is limited in comparison to the short-term studies based on teachers and PE.

Coulter and Woods (2012) in-service CPD showed improved attitudes towards the O&AA strand after a six-week whole school training programme using a partnership initiative as teachers have stated they benefit by observing and engaging with external facilitators. This simple initiative could be implemented to improve overall teaching and thus supporting the learning of the children.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the critical findings found throughout the process of this research project. It discussed the limitations to the study which need to be acknowledged including sampling selection and size. The chapter details recommendations for future possible research and the influence into pedagogical practice and need for improved training through CPD for teachers (Beni, Ní Chróinín and Fletcher, 2021; Fletcher and Mandigo, 2012; Flanagan, 2014). 'The more we give importance to skill development the more competence will be our youth' (Modi, nd).

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Appendix 1 – Principals Letter of Consent

Dear Principal,

As part of my Professional Masters in (Primary) Education with Hibernia College, I am investigating the perspectives of current mainstream primary school teachers on the teaching of the Games strand from the PE subject of the Irish Primary School Curriculum.

The title of the research project is 'Irish Primary Teachers' Perspectives into the Teaching of Physical Education: Exploring the Games Strand and the Factors that Influence the Teaching Methodologies and Approaches in Current Classrooms'

Classroom teachers are key in the implementation and teaching of all subjects, this project is focussing on the teachers' perspectives of certain aspects of the teaching strategies and factors which effect the teaching of the games strand.

With your permission, I would like to share an online survey using a link with five classroom teachers. The staff will be asked to complete an online survey made up of twenty questions gain an insight into their perspectives and approaches used in the teaching of PE with a focus on the Games strand in particular. Participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate, and if you choose to do so, you and the staff may withdraw your consent at any time without any negative consequences.

If you and other staff members agree to participate in this study, your signed consent will be obtained before any data collection activities commence.

Your involvement in this study will require short period to select and share the link to the online questionnaire. It may also include permission for data collection at your school with the staff members, reviewing any relevant documents, or providing information as requested during the study period.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions, concerns, or require further information. I am available to discuss the study in detail and address any queries you may have .

Researcher:

Mobile:

Email:

This research study has received Ethics approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact: School of Education, Hibernia College Dublin.

Tel (01) 6610168

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date:

Appendix 2- Research Information Sheet

Researcher	Aoife Brassil
Organisation (name and contact details)	Hibernia College, Block B, The Merrion Centre, Merrion Road, Dublin 4. 01 661 0168
Supervisor	
Title of Study:	Irish Primary Teachers' Perspectives into the Teaching of Physical Education: Exploring the Games Strand and the Factors that Influence the Teaching Methodologies and Approaches in Current Classrooms

Outline of Research Study:

The Department of Education recommends that sixty minutes is allocated to the PE curriculum on a weekly basis. PE plays a key role in the promotion of healthy active lifestyles, the development of fine and gross motor skills and overall child development. There are many factors which influence the teaching of PE within the Irish primary school system. The aim of this research is to gain a broader understanding on how the games strand is taught by teachers and what are the factors which influence their decision in teaching strategies. The Games strand is multi-faceted and provides opportunities for children to be exposed to wide variety of games, skills, and knowledge.

Objectives of the project:

The objective of this research is to: determine whether the games strand is the dominant, most popular strand within the school environment; identify the most frequently applied teaching strategies which are used to teach the games strand and determine the factors which influence the teaching approaches and methodologies used.

What would I need you to do?

Your participation in this research is greatly appreciated. This research project has received ethical approval from Hibernia College Dublin. If you agree to participate, you will participate in a short semi-structured interview with the researcher. Any information you provide about your identity or that of the school will be anonymous and confidential. Quotes from the interview may be used and may also be published in the research however no identifying information will be disclosed. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and a copy of the transcript will be made available to you on request. This research will be used in a publication of a thesis for Hibernia College Dublin. It may also be used in conference proceedings or used in academic articles. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to complete a small-scale study which is a focal element of the final year of the Professional Masters of Education (Primary) with Hibernia College Dublin.

Appendix 3-Consent Form for Semi-Structured Interview

Researcher's Name:	[deleted]
Organisation:	Hibernia College Dublin
Title of Study:	Irish Primary Teachers' Perspectives into the Teaching of Physical Education: Exploring the Games Strand and the Factors that Influence the Teaching Methodologies and Approaches in Current Classrooms
Consent (Please read and answer all parts)	
<p>Have you been fully informed/ read the information sheet about this study? Yes / No</p> <p>Have you been given the opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? Yes / No</p> <p>Have you received the necessary and required information from your questions? Yes / No</p> <p>Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason for withdrawing and without your withdrawal having adverse effects for you? Yes / No</p> <p>Do you understand the interview will be recorded for research purposes? Yes / No</p> <p>Do you agree to participate in this study, with the possibility of results and findings being published and presented at a conference? Yes / No</p> <p>Have you been informed that a copy of this consent form will be kept by the researcher? Yes / No</p> <p>Are you satisfied that any information you give to the researcher will be kept confidential? Your name and name of the school will not appear in the research report. Yes / No</p>	
Participants name (PRINTED)	

Participants Signature	

Date:	
Researcher's Signature	

Appendix 4-Online Questionnaire for Professional Primary School Mainstream Class Teachers.

Research Questionnaire

Background:

This research and dissertation have a focus on developing and gathering information based on current primary school teacher's perceptions into PE teaching with a more specific focus on the Games Strand.

The results from this questionnaire will help to identify teachers' perspectives of the teaching methodologies and approaches used in current Irish classrooms while teaching the Games strand of the PE curriculum. The information and data collected may be used in future research and development within the PE curriculum system.

Games Strand:

The games strand fosters the child's natural tendency to play through informal play activities. It enhances the development of basic skills, and many opportunities are provided for social interaction. As skills develop in accordance with the stage of development of the child, the desire to apply them in informal activities in competition with others increases. Initially this may occur with a partner and then lead into 'small-sided' or mini-games.

Instructions:

Your participation in this research project is greatly appreciated and has received Ethical Approval from Hibernia College, Dublin.

If you agree to participate it involved completing this online questionnaire whereby you remain anonymous, and all data is confidential. This research may be used in future publications by Hibernia College.

Section 1

Please answer all questions. The information provided will be confidential to the researchers.

* Indicates required question

1. Gender

Mark only one oval.

- Male
 Female
 Prefer not to say

2. What age are you?

Mark only one oval.

- 21 - 25
 26 - 30
 31 - 35
 36 - 40
 41 - 45
 46 - 50
 51 - 55

3. How many years of professional Teaching Experience have you gained?
4. Which teaching programme did you complete?

Mark only one oval.

- Bachelor's Degree in Education (Primary)
- Professional Masters in Education (Primary)

5. Are you currently teaching in a mainstream classroom?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

6. Which class group do you currently teach? *

Mark only one oval.

- Junior Infants - Senior Infants
- 1st - 2nd class
- 3rd - 4th class
- 5th - 6th class
- Other: _____

7. Have you completed any additional Physical Education CPD / Coaching courses?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- If yes, can you please specify which course?
- Other: _____

Section 2: Physical Education in the Classroom

PE is one of the twelve subjects on the Irish Primary School Curriculum. It is unique 'due to the focus on the body and on physical experience and is an integral part of the educational process' (NCCA, 1999). The PE curriculum is versatile and is split into six strand units - Dance, Gymnastics, Athletics, Games, Outdoor Adventure and Activities and Aquatics.

8. How many PE lessons do you teach weekly

Mark only one oval.

- 1
- 2
- 3+

9. What is the **total** duration of your PE lessons weekly?

Mark only one oval.

- 0 - 15 mins
- 16 - 30 mins
- 31 - 45 mins
- 10. Does your school currently facilitate external specialist or external teachers to instruct / teach
- any of the six PE strands?

Mark only one oval.

Yes /No

11. If the answer was **yes** to the previous question, please tick the strands which the external teacher is responsible for?

Tick all that apply.

- Athletics
- Aquatics
- Gymnastics
- Dance
- Games
- Outdoor and Adventure Activities

12. Do you think there is a benefit for **children** to have a specialist or external teacher facilitating elements of the PE strands?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
-

13. Which strand of the PE curriculum do you spend most time teaching over the course of the year?

Tick all that apply.

- Athletics
- Aquatics
- Games
- Outdoor Adventure and Activities
- Gymnastics
- Dance
-

14. Please tick the Teaching Approaches you apply to teaching the Games Strand

Tick all that apply.

- Direct Teaching Method
- Guided- Discovery Method
- Integration with other subjects
- Station Teaching
- Co-operative Games
- Skills through Content
- Other: _____

Section 3: Teaching Preferences and Practices

Please chose a number which reflects your response, ranging from:

1. Strongly Disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neutral 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree

15. 'For many children the PE subject is their first introduction about physical activity, how to live a healthy active life and develop skills linked with physical activity'.

I feel competent to teach **all** PE strands covering the curriculum aims and objectives.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly Disagree

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Agree

16. I understand the curriculum objectives and aims involved with the **Games Strand** for the class I am teaching currently.

Strongly Disagree

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Agree

Mark only one oval.

17. My school has sufficient resources to teach the elements of the Games strand in PE? (i.e., outdoor area, hall, sports equipment, safety equipment)

Mark only one oval.

Strongly Disagree

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Agree

18. *Development Stage* specific skills are incorporated into the Games Strand lessons (Specified Skills - ball handling, kicking, carrying, and striking) *Mark only one oval.*

Strongly Disagree

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Agree

19. Children engage in creating and playing games (small-sided, small groups) regularly during my PE Games Lessons

Mark only one oval.

Strongly Disagree

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Agree

20. Children are actively engaged and involved in understand games, the rule making process and Games specific information during the Games strand lessons.

Mark only one oval.

Strongly Disagree

1

2

3

4

5

Strongly Agree

Appendix 5-Topic Guide of Questions for Semi-Structured Interview

A. Background Information

1. i) Which age group / class level do you currently teach? ii) How many years have you taught this class level?

2. Does your school have a PE school policy which you are required to follow?

3. Do you receive any external support or teachers to teach elements/ lessons of the PE curriculum? If yes, which ones?

- Researcher to name all six strands

4. Would you consider it beneficial to have external teachers for the PE curriculum? Explain:

5. Do you have experience teaching sport or physical activity outside of the school environment?

6. Are you involved with the school sporting teams? Or have previously been involved?

7. Have you taught previous age groups and observed any differences in teaching the Games strand? Strategies; Resources; Approaches used ? Difficulty?

8. Do you understand the curriculum aims and objectives set out in the Games Strand?

Researcher will provide a written copy of objectives at this point for interviewees to read.

9. Do you think it is easy or difficult to teach the Games strand in comparison to other strands units? is there any particular reasons or factors that make it this way for you?

B . Teaching Approaches

10. Would you have a preference on how to approach the games strand Including its teaching methods?

11. What would the most effective teaching approach or strategy be for you? **(Different types of teaching methodologies to be read out at this point)**

12. Do you prefer to concentrate on skill development and then into skill application or a combination of it at the same time?

13. Have you used/ do you use any additional educational teaching resources to plan your lessons/ approaches? **(Move Well Move Often; GAA handbook; Athletic Ireland; Hockey**

14. Are there any particular challenges that you have identified throughout your working career while approaching the games strand? If yes, can you name or discuss these?

C.Perspective

15. Would you feel competent to teach all the elements of the games strand and progress the skills adequately?

16. Would you consider upskilling in PE teaching through CPD courses or through engagement with external sports coaches which may attend the school? If not, why not?

17. What changes would you make to the Games strand, if any, with regards to teaching, resources, curriculum objectives and aims?

18. If you had an opportunity, do you think would like to improve your skills and knowledge in the area through CPD or through engagement with External teachers ?

Appendix 6-Thematic Analysis from Interview Transcript Extract

Yellow – Teachers confidence and competency.

Green – External Coaches – benefits, challenges,

Blue – Teachers Perspectives of challenges and reasons for teaching methodologies

Purple –Application of Games Strand

Red – Knowledge

Teacher 1:Yes, we do have a PE policy, but being honest I don't know what is involved with it. I know it is a post in the school PE that that person looks after the equipment

Researcher :Okay. Um, in the school at the moment, do you receive any external support or teachers to teach elements or strand units? Um, from the PE curriculum. So swimming, gymnastics, dance, athletics, Games, outdoor and adventure activities ?

Teacher 1 :Actually, all of them, we have a dance teacher comes in for a block, gymnastics for a block and from third class upwards go for swimming. We had TY's just finish with GAA coaching, it was brilliant

Researcher :And how long is, are those blocks, do you know?

Teacher 1 :The gymnastics is six weeks and the dance is six as well. The dance is irish dancing and it great because I wouldn't have a clue. Swimming, I'm not sure cuz my class don't go. And then we might, the older classes would have GAA and rugby I think. Yeah. Now we, this year had transition years came in, they were doing the GAA leadership training with the school Okay. Which we would, we never had before.

Researcher :Okay. And did, did you find it beneficial to you or the children?

Teacher 1 :Children? That was great because they, well what the, it wasn't just one person came from, there was about, I'd say there was an average of two transition years per every group of six. Okay. So it was, the manpower was great. Yeah.

Researcher :And to have 'em skill. Okay. Yeah. Um, do you have experience teaching sport or physical activity outside of the school?

Teacher 1 :I would've coached basketball only I think in the past. Yeah.

Researcher :And have you find, like, do you find the basketball beneficial for that? Like have you found that you use basketballs throughout the year with your

Teacher 1 :Skills? Well some of you see any, some of the drills can be used for ball handling so it can be applied to any sport. So I mean just, you know, the, the passing drills or you just movement, you might need to have a ball for some of them but just running in certain places, so yes. Yeah. Yeah. The rules are,, you'd structure the lesson sometimes how you would a training session

Researcher :Do you find yourself more confident with those ball handling in comparison to other skills then?

Teacher 1 :I would. Because you're used to it, I have more experience with that than some of the other things covered on the pe course. Other things I might have to look them up the night before to make sure that I'm, um, know what I'm doing. Yeah.

Researcher :Okay. And are you involved with the school sport teams or have you been before?

Teacher 1 :Uh, year, not lately. No. Years ago there was, there used to be a little uh, inter schools basketball league. They used to run for sixth class, but I dunno, I haven't seen it in years. Okay.

Researcher :Um, and then in relation to the previous years or your years' experience, have you observed any differences? So you're in second class now, in your other years, is there any particular strategies, resources or approaches that you found come like have compared?

Teacher 1 :I had infants for eight years, junior infants. Uh, I think the kind of basic approach was the same. I think all like being control is main thing that you are in charge and then that with the infants especially, you have to be really clear what you want. But um, I would approach it the same way. Okay. Just the skill things would be different and balls might be softer than the usual.

Researcher:Yeah. So the resources, so there might be those. Yeah. Yeah. Um, in size, in terms of the size of groups and things, would they differ between different groups, like different age groups? Would you be, would you have to go in pair group for infants in comparison to second class? You might have more in a group and

Teacher 1:I wouldn't have gone down as far as pairs because then you're trying to watch more. I would kind of keep the group, they would've been the same size groups, but you might have expected more obviously from the older ones. But I paired infants. Sorry, noticing for that one. No, I suppose you would, but generally whatever I'd be doing, if it's a peer work, I do it

