

A THEMATIC EVALUATION OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

October 2022



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Introduction

The Department of Education (DE) commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to undertake a thematic evaluation of physical education (PE) provision in primary schools¹. During March 2022, the ETI engaged² with 84 primary schools³ to observe practice and discuss their experiences of delivering the statutory PE curriculum.

The evaluation identifies and acknowledges the existing good practice in the delivery of PE across the primary school sector in Northern Ireland, as evidenced in most of the learning and teaching observed, including a range of examples of best practice.

In most schools, the children are provided with learning experiences that enable them to develop their PE skills. The learning provision, however, too often comprises discrete sessions that do not take sufficient account of their developmental progression over time, across all elements of the statutory PE curriculum. Consequently, there are a number of system-wide issues that need to be addressed collectively by schools, DE and other educational stakeholders to ensure all primary school children access fully, and optimise the intended benefits of, a well-planned, coherent and highly effective PE curriculum.

A fundamental issue is that in just over half of the schools, the children's opportunities to access the statutory PE curriculum are unduly limited. This is largely due to a lack of system-wide advocacy and insufficient curricular leadership to ensure a progressive, positive whole-school vision, coupled with consistent planning, for the delivery of high-quality PE.

Furthermore, in a significant minority of the schools, the teachers, including those most recently qualified, report that they are not sufficiently skilled or confident enough to plan and deliver safely all elements of the statutory PE curriculum, particularly for those children with special educational needs.

Crucially, the leaders in three-quarters of the schools report that, due to other perceived curricular demands and pressures, they are unable to implement fully the DE recommendation of providing children with at least two hours of PE each week.

In addition, almost one-third of primary schools lack the accommodation and facilities for PE that meet the standards outlined in DE's Primary School Schedule of Accommodation.

These key findings, when considered collectively, indicate clearly that much more needs to be done to better equip and support schools and teachers to harness the full spectrum of learning potential which the primary statutory PE curriculum affords.

¹ Appendix A: Terms of Reference

² Appendix B: Methodology and Evidence Base

³ Appendix C: List of contributing schools

Background and context

In the 'A Fitter Future for All: Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022'⁴ publication, The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety states that obesity is currently prevalent in 24% of the Northern Ireland population. It also emphasises that children and young people who are overweight or obese are also at increased risk of developing negative health factors that contribute to heart disease. Importantly, the publication also links childhood obesity to many other negative wellbeing factors including social and psychological bullying, low self-esteem and depression.

The *UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines, September 2019*⁵ recommends that children aged five years old and over need to undertake moderate to vigorous intensity activities for an average of at least sixty minutes per day across the week. This, they suggest, can include all forms of activity, such as, physical education, active travel, after-school activities, play and sports.

When referring to the mental and physical health of children, the *Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030*⁶ further underlines the partnership required between departments and local government, the health and social care sector, the education and further/higher education sectors, other statutory partners, employers and the community and voluntary sector, if we are to achieve *Northern Ireland's Programme for Government Outcome Framework*⁷ in relation to ensuring children enjoy long, healthy and active lives.

There are many contexts through which healthy lifestyles in children can be developed, and arguably, none is more important than our primary schools. Physical Education is one of the six areas of learning within the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) for Primary and is a statutory entitlement for every child from foundation stage to key stage (KS) 2. The aim of this area of learning is to develop physically literate individuals who have the knowledge, skills and confidence to enjoy and sustain a lifetime of healthy physical activity.

In the foundation stage, Physical Development and Movement gives our youngest children the opportunity to experience and develop a range of movement skills that will improve co-ordination, locomotion, control, balance and manipulation; a foundation that facilitates further, more complex skills development as the child progresses through each of the key stages.

In KS1 and KS2, the PE curriculum provides opportunities for children to develop knowledge, understanding and skills in dance, athletics, games and gymnastics, progressing to include swimming at KS2.

⁴ [A Fitter Future for All: Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022](#)

⁵ [UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines](#)

⁶ [Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030](#)

⁷ [NI Programme for Government 2021](#)

Aligning with the co-ordinated, integrated and cross-sectoral approach to addressing the issue of overweight and obesity, as proposed in '*A Fitter Future for All: Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2020*' publication, the DE Statutory Curriculum guidance⁸ underlines the need for children to have opportunities to engage in good-quality PE that:

- develops their interests, talents and resilience;
- extends their knowledge, understanding and skills; and
- contributes to their wellbeing and helps sustain a healthy and active lifestyle.

It is up to each school to determine how much time is devoted to PE in the curriculum, but departmental guidance recommends that schools should provide children with a minimum of two hours curricular PE per week. The guidance emphasises the fact that primary school children should have opportunities to participate in daily physical activities, either indoors or outdoors, that include physical play along with regular well-planned, active, engaging and challenging PE learning experiences that encourage children to develop:

- positive attitudes to, and enjoyment of, physical activity;
- an awareness of the positive impact of physical activity on health and wellbeing; and
- positive sporting behaviour and a sense of fair play.

Extra-curricular physical activity (school and inter-school sport) provides additional opportunities for children to develop these skills and resilience in different contexts, including competitions within school and against other schools. In addition, schools often build effective relationships with the communities they serve through the medium of sport and many children pursue a community-based sport; for some, this may lead to elite amateur or professional sport. In the publication, *Your School, Your Club*⁹, Sport NI further promotes the integration of community sport and sports clubs into schools because of the many benefits to the community, the school and academic achievement.

Primary school PE has, however, been impacted significantly by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic resulted in a significantly restricted PE programme across the schools due to: the initial DE 2021/2022 curriculum planning recommendation advising schools not to teach PE indoors with more than fifteen children at any one time; the re-purposing of some multi-purpose halls; a limitation on facilities and equipment; reduced or no access to external facilities, such as swimming pools or community halls; increased cleaning responsibilities; a dependency on outside spaces; and, restricted or no access to extra-curricular activities.

⁸ [DE guidance PE recommendations](#)

⁹ [Sport NI - Your School. Your Club](#)

Stranmillis University College's *Home-schooling Report*¹⁰ referenced the impact of COVID-19 on children's physical activity. In August 2021, DE issued additional guidance on curriculum planning¹¹ for the 2021/22 school year. The guidance emphasises that both formal PE and daily outdoor physical activity have a central role to play in our schools and offer important opportunities for both active learning and increased children's engagement. Additionally, the guidance references studies which have shown that many children have had significantly reduced levels of physical activity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The guidance again highlights the importance of children having access to at least two hours of PE each week within the curriculum on their return to school due to:

- the positive impact that physical exercise can have on children's health and wellbeing; and
- the benefits in the development of resilience and progression of skills, knowledge and understanding in the range of activity areas that make up the PE curriculum.

To support the vital efforts of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent period of recovery, all ETI inspections were paused on 18 March 2020. In line with the Minister for Education's priorities, and those of other commissioning departments, a wide range of ETI district inspector activity continued, including this evaluation. During the evaluation in March 2022, primary schools were still managing the complexities outlined above alongside a significant number of COVID-19 health-related issues within the school community. Given these contextual challenges, the ETI evaluation team briefed and liaised with school leaders on the organisation of the visits; and, in almost all of the schools visited, the teachers self-nominated for observation of practice.

This thematic evaluation report highlights primary schools' current strengths and the next steps necessary for further development. The report takes into account the relevant statutory guidance, including the NIC for primary, the Children and Young People's Strategy, the Chief Medical Officers' September 2019 guidelines and DE's August 2021 guidance.

The examples of best practice, together with recommended next steps, included in this report will provide policy makers and teachers with insights on how to continue to improve capacity for effective practice in primary schools' PE provision, for the benefit of the children's academic development and their lifelong health and wellbeing.

After considerable public consultation, in October 2022, Ministers from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland collaborated with Sport NI and Sport Ireland to launch a new All-Island Physical Literacy Consensus Statement that aims to promote a culture of lifelong participation in physical activity and sport for all.

¹⁰ [Home-schooling-Report-2021-CREU-Final-March-2021.pdf \(stran.ac.uk\)](https://www.stran.ac.uk/home-schooling-report-2021-CREU-Final-March-2021.pdf)

¹¹ [Curriculum Planning for Primary Schools 2021/22](#)

The statement defines physical literacy as:

“Physical literacy is the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding that enables a person to value and participate in physical activity throughout life.”

This statement advocates for the integration of this Physical Literacy definition into policy, practice and research and encourages collaboration between key organisations and sectors, including primary education, where the importance of learning fundamental skills is underlined. The findings and recommendations included within this report, align with the All-Ireland Physical Literacy Consensus Statement.

Key findings

Vision and strategic planning

In a significant minority (48%) of the schools¹², physical education is a highly-valued and prioritised aspect of the children's learning and statutory curricular entitlement. In these schools, there is an experienced, knowledgeable and skilled curriculum leader¹³ in post to co-ordinate and oversee the provision and be an effective role model for high-quality learning and teaching in PE. Consequently, all of the staff share a coherent, regularly-reviewed vision for the delivery of PE, which inspires and enables effective whole-school planning to facilitate provision that affords the children opportunities to achieve high standards.

Where the vision and strategic planning is of the highest quality, in 13% of schools, there are very well-embedded review processes whereby PE is identified regularly as an area of priority on the school development plan (SDP) and rigorous systems are in place to monitor and evaluate the impact of the provision and drive further improvement.

In the remaining schools (52%), the vision and strategic planning are underdeveloped and not effective enough. The schools' prioritisation and perceived pressure to deliver literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) outcomes, and recovery from post-COVID-19 lockdowns, are among the issues reported as impacting adversely on the development of the PE curriculum. The delivery of PE within the school curriculum is not sufficiently prioritised by all staff despite the DE guidance. Importantly, in most of these schools there is no trained, skilled and confident curriculum leader to lead and oversee the safe and effective delivery and development of the PE provision.

Examples of best practice

The curriculum leader for PE completes an annual audit and informs the senior leadership, including the board of governors, of: the quality of learning and teaching; the children's outcomes; and, the areas for future development in PE.

The curriculum leader for PE engages in action research to ensure their own knowledge and skills of pedagogical development in PE are current, accurate and research-based.

¹² The statistical data presented in the key findings refers to the 69 schools visited only.

¹³ Refers to PE co-ordinator or a teacher responsible for the development of PE.

Lesson planning to ensure breadth and balance

In a majority (61%) of the schools, the sequencing and planning of lessons within year groups is effective or better. Progressive schemes of work guide coherent long- and medium-term planning for the year groups, which support teachers in the delivery of all key elements of the statutory PE curriculum.

Where the planning is highly effective, in 12% of schools, there are well-considered learning experiences for the children to engage in exploration, creativity, problem-solving and decision-making activities throughout PE lessons. These provide the children with opportunities to connect PE to other areas of learning while fostering their skills, attitudes and dispositions. Also, in these schools, post-lesson evaluations of planning are rigorous and inform the nature and content of subsequent lessons, as well as contributing to the school's ongoing strategic review and planning of PE.

In the remaining schools (39%), the planning is inconsistent and often ad hoc and disjointed, resulting in a lack of breadth, balance and progression in the PE provision, and a lack of continuity across and through the key stages of the NIC. Consequently, the lessons, including those planned and delivered solely by external organisations, do not build sufficiently upon the children's interests, needs or prior learning and have limited relevance for the children or connectedness to the other areas of learning of the NIC.

Examples of best practice

Planning is built progressively on learning achieved at previous key stages and informed by both the children's and teachers' well-considered evaluation of their learning.

The curriculum leader for PE works collegially with other middle leaders to provide cross-curricular approaches to the teaching of PE, and ensures subsequent planning also provides opportunities for children to develop the transferable skills of Communication, Using Mathematics, Using ICT and Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities.

Learning and teaching

In most (81%) of the schools, there are teachers who are broadly aware of, and largely responsive to, the needs of the children in the class, including those with special educational needs. As a result, these children are provided with relevant learning experiences to develop their PE skills. A key strength of the learning observed was the expertise of the teacher in creating a safe, active and inclusive learning environment. The learning activities observed were challenging, encouraged commitment, built confidence and created high expectations. The PE lessons are, however, too often discrete and do not take sufficient account of the children's developmental progression over time, and across all elements of the statutory PE curriculum.

Where learning experiences are of the highest quality, in 10% of schools, the children have very good opportunities to develop all key elements of the statutory PE curriculum, including access to at least two hours of PE each week. The learning strategies employed by the teacher also encourage the development of the children's transferable skills of: questioning; collaborative learning; independent learning; and, provided explicit connections across the children's other learning experiences. In these schools, children with additional needs, including where relevant, those with physical disabilities or from within the Autism Support Class (ASC) and Learning Support Class (LSC), are well supported. Where necessary, the activities are modified to allow all children to engage fully in PE, extra-curricular activities and sports day.

While the evaluation has identified examples of effective learning and teaching in most of the schools, in the remaining minority (19%) of schools, the leaders report that teachers have insufficient capacity to ensure all children, including those with additional needs, have access to the minimum statutory entitlement. As a result, all children do not experience all of the key elements of the statutory PE curriculum. The development of the children's physical skills, through PE, is not included, when required, in individual education plans (IEP)/pupil learning plans (PLP), and PE activities are not adapted or modified sufficiently to ensure children with special educational needs, including those with additional physical difficulties, are included fully and able to make progress. In these schools, health-promoting initiatives, such as the 'Daily Mile', are too often viewed as being part of, rather than in addition to, the key elements of the statutory PE curriculum.

Significantly, a majority (74%) of all schools visited report that they are unable to provide the children, across all key stages, with the DE recommendation of access to at least two hours¹⁴ of PE each week. This is largely due to other perceived curricular demands and logistical pressures, such as sufficient timetabled access to a multi-purpose hall and the notable time required to travel to alternative facilities.

¹⁴ This is a calculation of hours engaged in active whole-class PE only and does not include foundation stage physical play, outdoor learning or time required for transportation to local amenities.

Examples of best practice

The school provides every child with frequent and progressive participation in all key elements of the PE curriculum and plans regular whole-school events that increase the children's understanding of the immense value and importance of a lifelong healthy lifestyle.

The school consults with skilled and experienced staff from the local special school to investigate and explore ways of adapting practice to ensure children with specific additional needs can integrate into and participate more fully in PE lessons. This ensures children from the ASC and LSC classes are included and make progress within mainstream PE lessons.



Assessment and progression

In a majority (52%) of the schools, the teachers are confident in evaluating effectively the children's performance and tracking their progress within PE. As a result, the children: are highly motivated; engage enthusiastically; and, value the benefits of PE. They understand that it relates to their physical and emotional health and wellbeing. In these schools, the teachers reflect consistently on the children's learning throughout the lessons and modify appropriately the activities to ensure progression in learning.

Where assessment and progression are most impactful, in 4% of schools, the teachers monitor regularly the children's understanding of PE and provide high-quality feedback to ensure the children have an accurate understanding of their progress and what they need to do to improve. In these schools, the active learning approaches create a climate of enquiry where the children ask relevant questions. The teachers also provide purposeful opportunities for them to self- and peer-assess their performance, so that the children recognise their own and other children's progress. Crucially, the children's individual achievements are leading to an increase in confidence, interest and motivation beyond PE and into wider aspects of their education. To maintain the children's progression, the teachers also communicate prior learning accurately to colleagues and parents/carers at the key stage transition points.

For the remaining schools (48%), where assessment processes are not well enough established or absent, the evaluation of the children's learning, including learning during sessions delivered by external organisations, is not effective enough. It is not being considered fully or used to modify delivery to ensure progression for all children. As a consequence, the children's prior learning is not communicated effectively and subsequent PE lessons lack sufficient opportunities for the children to engage in new learning, be challenged and make sustained progress.

Examples of best practice

The enhanced use of digital technology to record aspects of PE lessons is increasing opportunities for self- and peer-assessment which are ultimately improving the children's own understanding of progress and areas for improvement.

An appropriately trained and skilled gymnastics coach, who is also a parent in the school, works in a voluntary capacity, supporting teachers to plan and deliver increased challenge to further develop the skills of the higher-performing young gymnasts.

Teacher skills, qualifications and professional development

Teachers in a majority (62%) of the schools understand clearly all the elements and expectations of the statutory PE curriculum and are confident in planning and delivering PE. They review and evaluate regularly their own performance in the delivery of PE and identify opportunities to improve further their knowledge and development of relevant pedagogical skills.

Where the teachers are very confident in the delivery of all elements of the PE curriculum, in 17% of schools, the staff are focused on building their expertise and capacity in the delivery of PE through career-long professional learning. Crucially, the curriculum leader models PE lessons, shares effective practice and upskills staff routinely, through team teaching or staff training, to ensure all colleagues' knowledge and skills of pedagogical development in PE are current, accurate and research-based.

In the remaining schools (38%), the teachers who did not study PE as a main subject, report that due to limited PE training experiences during initial teacher training, and minimal ongoing professional learning opportunities, they lack the knowledge, skills and confidence to deliver fully the statutory PE curriculum. This includes teachers beginning or at the early stages of their career. Their reported deficiency in knowledge and skills is resulting in delivery of simple sporting activities or lessons only in the areas they feel confident to teach, rather than lessons that incorporate accurately all key elements of the statutory PE curriculum. Consequently, there are insufficient opportunities for children in the foundation stage to develop fully their fundamental movement skills and for the children in KS1 and 2 to develop skills across dance and gymnastics. In a number of schools, where the staff report a significant lack of confidence, there is a reported dependence on external organisations for the ongoing delivery of PE.

Examples of best practice

The PE curriculum leader is afforded time to: team teach; support colleagues in the review and update of schemes of work/lines of progression; and, provide staff development relating to the safe and creative delivery of PE.

The school identifies and utilises staff who are trained and skilled in the delivery of a range of sports and uses their expertise and experience to improve whole-school planning for PE, upskill colleagues and support the school's extra-curricular provision.

Resources and accommodation

A majority (70%) of the schools have access to adequately-sized indoor facilities and a grass or artificial grass area to accommodate the delivery of primary PE and extra-curricular sporting activities. The children also have access to a sufficient number of resources that are well-organised, accessible and appropriate to their stage of development. This evaluation identifies that a significant minority of these schools are availing of local indoor and/or outdoor facilities to supplement school-based accommodation.

Where the resources and accommodation are contributing very effectively to the school's delivery of PE, in 26% of schools, the use of resources is monitored closely by the PE curriculum leader to evaluate the benefits and the impact on the outcomes for the children. In addition, these schools are innovative in identifying and availing of alternative community-based facilities, such as, post-primary schools, recreation centres, parks and even beaches, to enrich further the children's experiences in PE. They are also creative in utilising all facilities available to maintain and increase the children's activity outdoors during break and lunch times.

In the remaining schools (30%), and often in spite of the best intentions of the teachers, the planning and delivery of PE is being impacted adversely by inadequate accommodation¹⁵. This includes indoor facilities which are insufficient in size, and outdoor facilities which are limited by poor drainage, sloped/uneven ground and/or insufficient fencing. In addition, the timetabling and use of multi-purpose halls for PE lessons is limited considerably by the need to accommodate school meals, other curricular activities and school events. In a minority of schools, there is an absence of designated indoor space for the children to engage in PE and a small number of schools do not have access to either an indoor or outdoor facility. Some of these schools are not availing of other local schools' PE facilities, council and privately-owned facilities which could support and improve their delivery of PE. In some cases, this is because of a lack of strategic planning, however, in most cases, it is because of the: uncertainty relating to indemnity insurance; prohibitive costs; and, the additional time required for transportation.

Examples of best practice

Advanced planning by, and effective communication with, staff is ensuring that teachers consider other relevant activities and access alternative facilities when the multi-purpose hall is required for additional purposes.

The school and Education Authority work closely with the local council to negotiate sole school-time use of the recently-constructed recreation centre, providing access to significantly improved indoor and outdoor facilities for PE.

¹⁵ Based on the current Primary School Schedule of Accommodation.

Community links and external partners

Most (84%) of the schools have identified and established community links with suitably qualified community partners, including appropriately skilled and experienced coaches from local sports clubs and governing bodies¹⁶. Subsequently, the teachers have access to specialist local knowledge and skills which improve the quality of their planning for PE and extra-curricular physical activities. In most cases, a wide range of extra-curricular physical activities is also providing the children with regular opportunities to compete in inter-school competitions.

Where there are highly-productive community links, in 38% of schools, there is a shared understanding that the aim of the external partnership is to contribute to developing the children's fundamental skills across a wide range of sporting activities, rather than just their performance in one specific sport. These schools also engage proactively with former pupils who are now successful athletes and provide opportunities for them to share their experiences and skills with, and act as role models for, the children. The community links provide further opportunities for children to engage in physical and wellbeing activities, both within and beyond the school, and the opportunity to participate in a range of competitive sport. In most cases, the schools are committed to maintaining a tradition of sporting achievement within the local and wider community.

The remaining schools (16%), are not engaging appropriately, or not at all, with local clubs or governing bodies. Subsequently, the children do not have any opportunities to compete regularly against children from other schools and learn from skilled and experienced local coaches and players. These schools are also missing opportunities to encourage participation in sport outside of school and to celebrate the children's sporting success within the school and local community.

Examples of best practice

Over an agreed, time-bound period, Irish Football Association (IFA) and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) staff modelled the planning and delivery of physical development and movement to support the upskilling of foundation stage staff. Subsequently, the teachers can now plan and deliver PE independently and confidently.

The school is proactive in identifying opportunities for the children to participate in termly inter-school competitions and the children express pride and pleasure from the opportunities they have to engage, co-operate and compete with others.

¹⁶ Including the Irish Football Association (IFA) and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) via The Sports Programme.

Key reflections and commentary

The effects on various aspects of children's physical and emotional health and wellbeing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are very well documented. In particular, specialists report the prevalence of post-traumatic stress symptoms, sleep disorders and anxiety; and symptoms of depression have increased significantly for children, specifically relating to fears and concerns about the impact of the pandemic on their lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has, however, also clearly re-emphasised the benefits of encouraging children to move their bodies regularly, not only for physical health, but also for emotional health and wellbeing and cognitive development.

Well-planned and coherent PE is a statutory entitlement for every child. Children who engage in regular, high-quality PE: think in different ways; are more creative and imaginative; and, understand the relationship between physical activity and good health. Following a period of significant disruption to children's activity levels and education, it has never been more important that all stakeholders recognise and value the role that high-quality PE and sport can play in boosting the health and wellbeing of all our children. Regular, carefully-planned PE can significantly improve the behavioural health of children living with a range of emotional and stress related anxieties. It can also contribute positively to the behaviour of children with special educational needs, including those with autism and/or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. It is clear that children facing these challenges are better able to pay attention after they have been physically active.

Encouragingly, this thematic evaluation has identified existing effective practice in the delivery of PE across the primary school sector in Northern Ireland, including examples of best practice. Based on the findings in this report, it is equally clear that many schools and stakeholders are still not recognising and/or realising the full potential of PE to contribute positively to the learning process and the children's emotional health and wellbeing. As a result, there are significant areas for improvement to be addressed.

Vision, Strategy and Leadership

At the time of this evaluation, 52% of schools do not have a sufficient whole-school vision for PE and the strategic planning for the provision is underdeveloped. Notably, in most of these schools, there is no trained, skilled and confident PE curriculum leader to advocate for, lead and oversee the development of this crucial area of learning. In contrast, it is clear from this evaluation that a school's provision for PE improves significantly when a PE curriculum leader is in position and engages internally and externally with colleagues to develop the safe and creative delivery of all elements of the statutory curriculum for PE. It will be important therefore, in going forward, that school leaders value fully the role of PE within the curriculum and all schools have access to an adequately skilled PE curriculum leader to promote and support the development of the PE curriculum.

Curriculum Breadth and Balance

Considering the potential for PE to improve physical and emotional health and to support children's learning, the UK's Chief Medical Officer has recommended children should be accessing at least 60 minutes of daily activity. When this recommendation is considered alongside the finding that 74% of schools are unable to provide their children with access to two hours of PE each week, critical questions are raised relating to the relevance, flexibility, balance and breadth of the curriculum being provided. In going forward, all stakeholders need to consider earnestly the curricular demands and logistical pressures being placed on primary schools. In addition, with the support and guidance of DE and the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), school leaders must take confident control of their curriculum to ensure their PE provision is relevant globally, nationally and locally, for their children.

Learning and Teaching

Examples of effective learning and teaching were observed in 81% of the schools visited, which confirms that in most schools, there are teachers who are broadly aware of, and largely responsive to, the needs of the children in their class, including those with special educational needs. The PE lessons are, however, too often discrete and do not take sufficient account of the children's developmental progression over time, and across all elements of the statutory PE curriculum. Going forward, the learning experiences in PE need to reflect better the statutory PE curriculum and enable sufficient progression for every child. It will be equally important to: share the existing good practice across the sector; incorporate it appropriately in schools' development plans; and build upon it over time, in order to improve the quality and consistency of the PE provision across all primary schools.

Initial Teacher Education and Teacher Professional Learning

During this evaluation, 38% of schools reported that their teachers had insufficient experiences during initial teacher education and a lack of ongoing professional learning opportunities to prepare them for the effective delivery of all aspects of the statutory PE curriculum. Subsequently, in a number of these schools, health-promoting initiatives are too often included as part of, rather than in addition to the key elements of the statutory PE curriculum. There is also an increasingly reported dependency on unregulated external organisations to support the delivery of PE and an overemphasis on athletics and games to the detriment of dance and gymnastics. Often, however, rather than improving the position, this dependency on external organisations is further undermining the importance of PE within the wider primary curriculum and accelerating a decline in teacher skills and confidence to plan for, and deliver PE. Consequently, for example, in 48% of schools, assessment and evaluation of the children's learning and development in PE are not being reviewed or used adequately in order to ensure appropriate levels of challenge and progression for all of the children. In going forward, it is imperative that all teachers acquire and develop the relevant skills and confidence to deliver an effective PE programme.

Accommodation and Facilities

Seventy percent of schools have access to the appropriate facilities to support the delivery of PE. This includes a significant minority which are creative in availing of alternative local community-based indoor and/or outdoor facilities. The remaining 30% of schools have inadequate accommodation to plan for and deliver all five elements of the statutory curriculum and realise the DE recommendation of two hours of PE each week. The relocation of classes to PE or multi-purpose halls, to ensure adequate social-distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, further compounded the problems faced by schools. If all schools are to deliver the statutory entitlement for PE, going forward, all stakeholders need to evaluate the current accommodation and facilities across the primary school estate and consider how to overcome the deficiencies in accommodation and the challenges of accessing appropriate alternative facilities.

It is clear that there is potential for, and now needs to be a well-targeted and purposeful improvement in PE provision within the majority of our primary schools. It is, as identified in research and government strategy and policies, including the Programme for Government and now promoted through the new All-Island Physical Literacy Statement, crucially important that children are better supported, and have opportunities to engage in and make progress in PE so they develop into active and healthy adults.

Conclusion and next steps

In order to meet the requirements of the curriculum and allow primary schools to endeavour to meet, at the very least, the minimum statutory guidance for PE, it is critical that the following next steps are considered and acted upon collectively and decisively by schools, DE and other educational stakeholders.

- Governors should ensure principals and teachers develop a vision which incorporates purposeful implementation of the PE curriculum to support children's all-round development, including the physical and intellectual skills that will nurture their emotional and academic development and improve their lifelong health.
- Employing authorities and governors need to support school leaders in accessing a suitably trained, skilled and confident teacher to lead or provide support to the school in the safe and effective planning, delivery and development of PE in line with statutory curricular guidance.
- Schools should now review the flexibility, breadth and balance of their curricular provision, modify delivery confidently to align with the expectations of the NIC, and ensure every child is provided with sufficient time to access and benefit from all aspects of the statutory PE curriculum.

- Initial teacher education providers should: continue to engage with principals with a view to identifying how they, as providers, can better equip all prospective primary teachers with the capacity to deliver confidently a coherent programme of PE; and, work with employing authorities and other stakeholders to design and provide additional professional support throughout a teacher's early professional development.
- Employing authorities and governors need to support teachers in accessing regular, career-long professional development opportunities to refresh and rebuild their capability for effective planning and delivery of all elements of the statutory primary PE curriculum.
- Schools should continue to form meaningful partnerships that are complementary to the delivery of PE and ensure the upskilling of teachers is central in the time-bound employment of any external organisations.
- DE needs to: review the current primary school estate; address deficiencies in accommodation; and, support schools in overcoming the challenges of accessing alternative, appropriate accommodation that facilitates the DE recommendation of access to at least two hours a week of high-quality PE.

The ETI will carry out follow-up activity to this report, in 24 months, to evaluate the impact of the steps taken by all stakeholders to realise the full potential of the statutory primary curriculum for PE.

Appendix A: Terms of Reference

The Department of Education (DE) commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to undertake a thematic evaluation of Physical Education (PE) provision in Primary schools. The purpose of the evaluation was to consider the nature and quality of the provision, including best practice and barriers to children's participation, with particular reference to the:

- whole-school vision for PE;
- curriculum planning and children's learning;
- delivery of breadth and balance within the minimum statutory requirement for PE;
- DE recommendation that schools should provide children with a minimum of two hours curricular PE per week;
- skills, qualifications and professional development of teachers to support the delivery of PE; and
- availability and use of accommodation and resources.

Appendix B: Methodology and Evidence Base

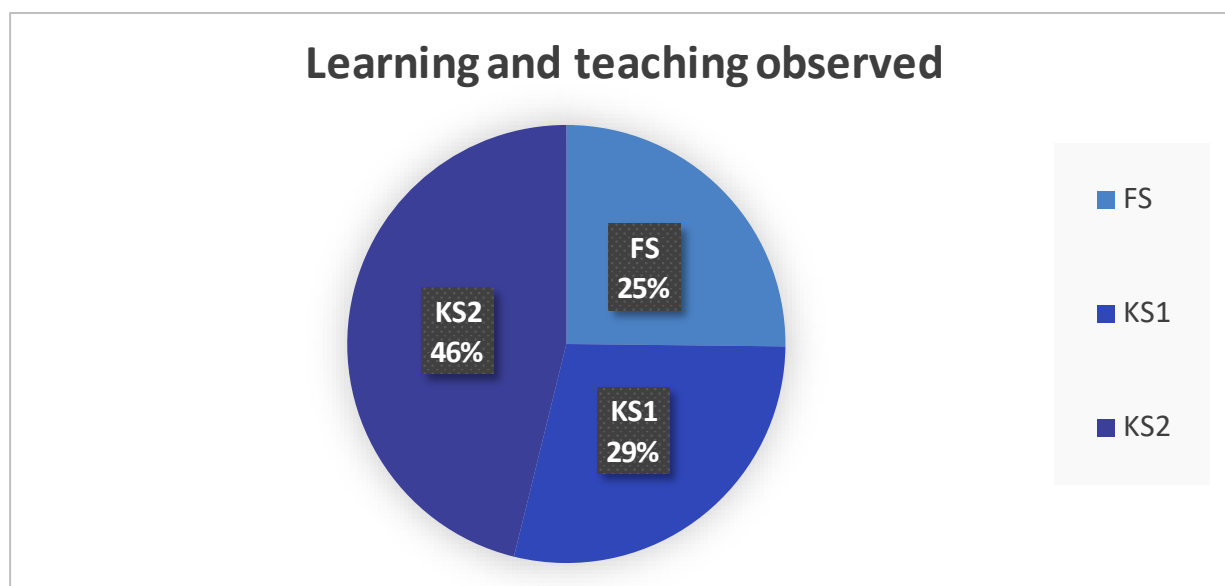
The evaluation was undertaken by a team of ETI inspectors and associate assessors who are primary specialists¹⁷.

A total of 69 schools were visited between 21 and 31 March 2022 and represent 8.5% of the Northern Ireland primary school estate. The range of visits was representative of a range of enrolments, all geographical locations and sectors, including preparatory, controlled, maintained, integrated and Irish-medium. The schools identified for an evaluation visit were provided with an online briefing session to outline the rationale and approach to be taken during the evaluation.

In all of the evaluation visits, the team member met with middle and/or senior leaders to discuss the school's vision, planning, delivery and evaluation of PE. Any lesson or action planning documentation referred to throughout this report relates to that which the schools self-identified to share with the evaluation team. During a visit, the team members also met with groups of children to provide them with the opportunity to share their views and experiences of PE.

One hundred and forty-three primary PE lessons were observed across two or more key stages as illustrated in Figure 1. In almost all of the schools, the teachers self-nominated for observation of practice.

Figure 1



School representatives from a further 15 schools engaged in additional online focus group discussions relating specifically to the evaluation.

While the statistical data presented in the key findings refers to the 69 schools visited only, the overall evaluation findings are based on both the school visits and the focus group discussions.

¹⁷ Associate assessor (AA): A senior professional from an educational organisation who has expertise and experience in a particular educational area. AAs are appointed by public advertisement and interview.

Appendix C: Schools included in the evaluation

Schools visited

Abercorn Primary School, Banbridge
Aghadrumsee Primary School, Enniskillen
Andrews Memorial Primary School, Comber
Ballymoney Controlled Integrated Primary School, Ballymoney
Ballynahinch Primary School, Ballynahinch
Ballyoran Primary School, Craigavon
Bronte Primary School, Banbridge
Camphill Primary School, Ballymena
Carnaghts Primary School, Ballymena
Carniny Primary School, Ballymena
Carr Primary School, Lisburn
Carrowreagh Primary School, Ballymoney
Castleroe Primary School, Coleraine
Cliftonville Integrated Primary School, Belfast
Corran Integrated Primary School, Larne
Downpatrick Primary School, Downpatrick
Dromore Road Primary School, Warrenpoint
Dundonald Primary School, Belfast
Fivemiletown Primary School, Fivemiletown
Foley County Primary School, Armagh
Forge Integrated Primary School, Belfast
Gaelscoil Éanna, Newtownabbey
Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach, Crumlin
Gaelscoil na bhFál, Belfast
Greenhaw Primary School, Londonderry
Holy Trinity Primary School, Belfast
Holy Trinity Primary School, Cookstown
Howard Primary School, Dungannon
Kilbride Central Primary School, Ballyclare
Limavady Central Primary School, Limavady
Lisburn Central Primary School, Lisburn
Mallusk Controlled Integrated Primary, Mallusk
Maralin Village Primary School, Craigavon
Millisle Primary School, Millisle
Millstrand Integrated Primary School, Portrush
Moirá Primary School, Moira
Mossley Primary School, Newtownabbey
Moyallon Primary School, Craigavon
Newtownhamilton Primary School, Newtownhamilton
Oakgrove Integrated Primary School, Londonderry
Orritor Primary School, Cookstown
Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School, Belfast
Parkgate Primary School, Ballyclare
Portaferry Integrated Primary School, Portaferry
Roscavey Primary School, Omagh

Sacred Heart Primary School, Dungannon
Saints and Scholars Integrated Primary School, Armagh
Seaview Integrated Primary School, Ballymena
St Anne's Primary School, Ballymena
St Bride's Primary School, Belfast
St Colman's Primary School, Newry
St Eoghan's Primary School, Draperstown
St Ita's Primary School, Belfast
St Joseph's Primary School, Strangford
St MacNissi's Primary School, Newtownabbey
St Mary's Primary School, Comber
St Mary's Primary School, Banbridge
St Mary's Primary School, Maguiresbridge
St Patrick's and St Brigid's Primary School, Ballycastle
St Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon
St Ronan's Primary School, Enniskillen
St Ronan's Primary School, Newry
Stewartstown Primary School, Stewartstown
Tannaghmore Primary School, Craigavon
Victoria Preparatory Department, Belfast
Wallace Preparatory Department, Belfast
Wheatfield Primary School, Belfast
Whiteabbey Primary School, Whiteabbey
Windsor Hill Primary School, Newry

Schools that participated in focus group discussions

Annalong Primary School, Annalong
Annsborough Integrated School, Castlewellan
Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, Belfast
Cedar Integrated Primary School, Crossgar
Churchtown Primary School, Cookstown
Donemana Primary School, Strabane
Fourtowns Primary School, Ballymena
Gaelscoil na mBeann, Kilkeel
St Colmcille's Primary School, Downpatrick
St John the Baptist Primary School, Belfast
St Lawrence's Primary School, Omagh
St Malachy's Primary School, Bangor
St Mary's Primary School, Saintfield
St Peter's and St Paul's Primary School, Derry
St Teresa's Primary School, Lurgan

Appendix D: Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

Quantitative terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

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