

From Policy to Practice: A Sociological Study of Gaelic Games in  
Irish Primary Schools

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## Abstract

The teaching of Gaelic games during physical education (PE) and extra-curricular sport features prominently in Irish primary schools. There is a long tradition of teacher commitment to the promotion of these games with a strong emphasis on competitive inter-scholastic structures. More recently, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the National Governing Body (NGB) for Gaelic games, has established an extensive school coaching programme to address a perceived decrease in teacher involvement in these activities.

To date, very little research has focused on the development and implementation of PE and school sport policies in primary schools. This study draws on aspects of figurational sociology to examine the dynamic nature of the policy process, with particular reference to Gaelic games. In particular, the research examines the factors that affect policy delivery at school level. It explores how Gaelic games have become established in primary schools, and investigates their impact on PE and school sport.

Using data generated by semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis and non-participant observations, the findings of this study suggest primary teachers make an important contribution to the promotion of Gaelic games in a voluntary capacity. Their childhood experiences of sport, along with their colleagues during the early part of their teaching careers, were significant in habitus formation. This research has uncovered complex networks of interdependent relationships where the consequences of policy decisions are often unintended and unplanned. Despite government and NGB policy advocating for inclusive games structures with an emphasis on maximum participation, traditional competitive structures remain popular among teachers. NGB coaches have a strong presence in schools, and it appears teachers are willing to cede responsibility for curricular PE time to them. Increasingly, sports fixtures are played during school time, impacting on the time available for curricular PE, and leading to blurred understandings of PE and sport.

## Declaration

I hereby declare that:

My submission as a whole is not substantially the same as any that I have previously made or am currently making, whether in published or unpublished form, for a degree, diploma, or similar qualification at any university or similar institution.

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Richard Bowles

## Acknowledgements

Earlier this year Amy, with all the perceptiveness and innocence of a seven year old, posed two fascinating questions: “How long is a PhD”? and “Do you have to fill in a lot of blank spaces”? More recently, these have been replaced by an exasperated “What time will you be home at, Daddy”? Despite a plethora of postponed outings that are ‘part and parcel’ of life for daughters of a part-time PhD student, I hope Clara, Amy and Martha are sufficiently enthused to value learning throughout their lives, and to continue to pose, and seek answers to, difficult questions.

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"What you get by reaching your destination is not nearly as important as what you will become by reaching your destination." - Zig Ziglar

*This work is dedicated to the memory of Sr. Joan Bowles, who always provided encouragement to pursue educational endeavour.*

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## List of Abbreviations

AGM: Annual General Meeting

An Coiste Naisiunta: National Committee

BOM: Board of Management

CA: Camogie Association

CAQDAS: Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software

EP: External Provider

DES: Department of Education and Skills

FAI: Football Association of Ireland

FMS: Fundamental Movement Skills

GAA: Gaelic Athletic Association

GDA: Games Development Administrator

GDC: Games Development Committee

GDM: Games Development Manager

GPO: Games Promotion Officer

HSE: Health Service Executive

INTO: Irish National Teachers Organisation

IPPEA: Irish Primary Physical Education Association

IPPN: Irish Primary Principals Network

IRFU: Irish Rugby Football Union

ISC: Irish Sports Council

KPI: Key Performance Indicator

LGFA: Ladies Gaelic Football Association

LSP: Local Sports Partnership

NGB: National Governing Body

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PEPAS: Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport

PESSCL: Physical Education School Sport Community Links

PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment

RDO: Regional Development Officer

SSE: School Self-evaluation

UK: United Kingdom

WSE: Whole School Evaluation