Flying the 'Active School Flag': physical activity promotion through self-evaluation in primary schools in Ireland

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Primary schools are key sites where children can be active, advance their knowledge and understanding of how to participate in physical activity (PA) and develop an appreciation of its importance in their lives. This study explored the role of schools in promoting PA asking: how do primary schools approach the promotion of whole-school PA? Data submitted by 21 schools as part of a self-evaluation PA initiative were included in a secondary analysis using an inductive thematic approach. Schools' approaches to PA promotion were more structured and inclusive, illustrating what schools valued and what they viewed as feasible within their contexts and resources. Self-evaluation and self-improvement processes can contribute to the promotion of whole-school PA in primary schools. While changes to school practices that better reflect educational policy on PA promotion are encouraging, the long-term impact of the self-evaluation process merits further investigation.

Keywords: physical education; primary; physical activity; co-curricular; sport

Introduction

Primary schools are key sites where children can be active, learn how to be active and develop an understanding of the important role of physical activity (PA) in their lives. School PA experiences contribute to the development of lifelong PA patterns (Jess and Collins 2003; Kirk 2005). This assertion is reflected in PA policy development in Ireland (Department of Health and Children 2005). Around the world, a variety of approaches and initiatives have been established to promote PA in schools (e.g. Naylor and McKay 2009; Pate and O'Neill 2009). Opportunities for children to be physically active include physical education (PE) lessons within curriculum time, formal and informal PA opportunities before, during and after school, and structured co-curricular activities outside of formal curriculum time. While PA initiatives may concentrate on any one of these areas, it is suggested that models which address the overall culture and policy of schools may be of greater benefit. It is thought that adopting a 'whole-school' approach will maximise school-based opportunities for reinforcing the relevance and value of PA to pupils (Fox, Cooper, and McKenna 2004).

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Researchers outline some of the characteristics of successful programmes including the integration of PA opportunities across the school day and engagement by the wider school community in actions to positively alter the school environment (Naylor et al. 2006). Fun, non-competitive activities and opportunities to explore a range of activities are preferred by children (Allender, Cowburn, and Foster 2006; Coulter and Woods 2011). In addition, effective leadership and collaboration are vital to the motivation of participants. A supportive environment also influences the level of engagement at local level and can have a long-term impact (Tjomsland 2010).

Supporting schools using a self-evaluation approach is a strategy that can be beneficial in school contexts (McNamara and O'Hara 2008; Schildkamp and Visscher 2010; Schildkamp, Visscher, and Luyten 2009). Self-evaluation can be defined as a procedure initiated and carried out by schools to describe and evaluate their own functioning (Vanhoof, De Maeyer, and Van Petegem 2011). Factors impacting the effectiveness of self-evaluation include a positive attitude towards the self-evaluation process, the capacity of the school to innovate and the relevance of the process to school needs (Schildkamp and Visscher 2009). Examination of the impact of self-evaluated school-based programmes on children's PA levels is encouraging (Naylor et al. 2006; Tjomsland 2010) and emphasises the value of involving teachers in action planning to identify potential improvements within their own contexts. However, studies from different countries often reflect differently resourced systems and are based on a diverse mix of pupils, teacher practices, traditions and aspirations of teacher groups (McKenna 2009). In Ireland, while there have been some school-based PA initiatives in primary schools (Sohun and MacDonncha 2007), there is little published research on schools' experiences and approaches taken to increasing PA through self-evaluation.

This study explored the role of Irish primary schools in promoting PA while involved in a whole-school PA promotion initiative: the Active School Flag (ASF). It examined how primary schools approached self-evaluation and self-improvements in PA promotion. It focused on how schools evaluated their current practices, what schools chose to prioritise and how these priorities were planned. Findings illustrate how these schools understood improvement in PA provision and what schools viewed as feasible within their contexts. Analysis of their self-evaluation documentation allowed for exploration of the factors that influenced each primary school's planning and provision and provided insight into current thinking around primary school PA.

Research focus and methodological framework

The Active School Flag

The ASF (www.activeschoolflag.ie) is a national self-evaluation initiative, established in 2009, focused on PA provision through PE, co-curricular PA and co-curricular sport. Award of the flag required schools to commit to a process of self-evaluation, involving planning and implementation of measures to enhance school PA provision. The ASF review documentation contained 18 points for review under five main sub-headings: (1) curriculum planning, (2) co-curricular activities, (3) additional promotion of PA, (4) links with the community and (5) qualifications, training and resources (Appendix 1). Eleven review areas were compulsory: five in the area of

PE and six in co-curricular sport and PA promotion. Schools also selected four non-compulsory review areas suitable to their context from a list of seven options.

During the review stage, schools were required to examine their current situation, then prioritise and rank for action based on their own needs. An exemplar review document was provided to assist schools in developing their plan. Questions were listed for each of the 18 review areas to guide schools' review of their current practices and to prompt possible directions for action planning.

The National ASF steering committee, established by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), awarded each ASF. Their decision was informed by reviewing planning documentation and written, photographic and/or DVD evidence documenting the school events and initiatives. An accreditation visit included interviews with the school community, demonstrations by the children and review of display areas to verify that the planned changes had been implemented. At primary level, approximately 85 flags have been awarded to date nationally out of approximately 700 expressions of interest.

Accessing the data

The data-set was submitted by schools who applied for an ASF. This closed data were accessed through the National ASF Steering Committee. All primary schools that were awarded the ASF were invited to participate in the study. Twenty-one schools consented to their data being included. To address ethical concerns around the use of data for purposes other than that originally intended (Bryman 2008) all of the participants provided informed consent. This sample included schools ranging from large urban schools to small town and rural schools countrywide.

This study involved a secondary analysis of data by researchers who were not involved in the collection of the data, and for purposes that may not have been envisaged by those involved in its generation. Therefore, before proceeding with secondary analysis of the data it was important to establish the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data-set. The key criteria used to examine trustworthiness were credibility, confirmability, transferability and dependability (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Skenton 2004). Bryman (2008) suggests that secondary use of qualitative data may actually add to the trustworthiness of the data-set as it removes the risk of bias in the participants' responses, coloured by their knowledge of the purposes of the research. Limitations of accessing each school's experiences and processes through the ASF structures were acknowledged and considered in reporting the findings and when considering the transferability of the findings to other contexts (Flick 2009). Dependability of the data was strengthened through provision of a detailed audit trail (Denscombe 2010) and triangulation using respondent validation (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

Authenticity of the data-set was also established. A key factor in this process was establishing that the understandings of PE and whole-school PA represented in the ASF documentation reflected understandings of these concepts at national policy level. This assurance was provided through examination by the researchers of the criteria and procedures of the ASF process and its establishment of alignment with policy documents such as the school curricula. It was further strengthened through recognition that the ASF committee included a representative sample of the national stakeholders, including the DES Inspectorate. In addition, the self-evaluation nature

of participants' responses strengthens authenticity of the data by avoiding a reactive effect (Bryman 2008). The ASF flag documentation reinforces this in advice to applicants: 'The ASF is non-competitive and there is no deadline. Your school creates an action plan to suit your own unique context and timeframe' (ASF primary documents, www.activeschoolflag.ie). We suggest that this resulted in a more authentic representation of how schools approached self-evaluation of whole-school PA than might result from a competitive process or one with an externally imposed timeframe.

Analysing the data

All three researchers were involved in a thematic analysis of the data (Attride-Stirling 2001; Braun and Clarke 2006) using an inductive approach within each of the headings of the ASF template. The researchers familiarised themselves with the data and individually assigned codes to features of the data they found interesting. The data-set from each school was examined individually and the areas selected and prioritised were noted, along with how each review area was acted upon. Data were compared from each school in relation to what schools had prioritised and how these review areas had been acted upon. Next, each researcher shared their initial coding through description where memoing was used as a strategy to track thinking and to highlight issues and questions raised by initial coding. Peer debriefing techniques were used to ensure shared understandings and consistency of coding between researchers during the analysis process. This was followed by a collaborative recursive process of finding repeated patterns of meaning across the data-set through comparison, categorisation and conceptualisation to support explanation (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey 2011). Consideration of the priority given to each review area and how it was acted upon by each individual school allowed for comparison between schools approaches to PA promotion. Agreement was built between the researchers through discussion of what constituted a theme and through a subsequent process involving searching for, reviewing and refining themes. The key ideas were confirmed as themes through re-engagement with the data-set by two of the researchers. Trustworthiness of the findings and conclusions involved member checking, which enhances the validity of the account presented thus strengthening the credibility of the findings (Lincoln and Guba 1986). Member checking involved discussion of the findings, interpretations and conclusions of the research with the ASF Committee. This discussion informed the interpretations and conclusions presented in this document.

Findings

Schools planned and implemented a series of changes to enhance PA opportunities in their schools that suggests a commitment to a process of self-evaluation and self-improvement. Our findings consider schools' approaches to changing PA and are presented by the following themes: structures, meanings and understandings and partnership. These themes are illustrated by participants' data and discussed in relation to the implications and significance of these findings.

Structures

Schools placed PA in a more central position in school life as reflected in these three areas: (1) alignment with curriculum structures, (2) engagement with physical structures and (3) increase in organisational structures.

Alignment with curriculum structures

The review process included a compulsory review of the planning and implementation of the PE curriculum. The alignment of PA practices with curriculum recommendations is evident in schools' commitment to provide one hour of PE per week to all children, and their selection of curriculum areas such as outdoor and adventure activities and gymnastics for development. The prioritisation of discretionary time provides further evidence of schools' use of curriculum structures to promote PA (School H, action plan).

Schools were prompted to examine and prioritise the core values underpinning their approaches by the requirements to consider how the key messages of the curriculum were reflected in their programmes. For many, action planning placed emphasis on fun and enjoyment, maximum participation and opportunities for achievement, which are key principles of the Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999). School Q outlined how they would implement these key messages:

- That each class will be able to recite the two key messages as their motto for PE for the year.
- To teach the children five yard games that promotes participation and enjoyment. (School Q, action plan)

Many schools outlined how they already promoted PA before and after school as well as during break and lunch times. The most commonly mentioned playground activities were soccer, Gaelic football and skipping. Initiatives around break and lunch time activities also reflected the key messages of the PE curriculum with an emphasis on inclusive activities, less competitive activities and opportunities for social interaction.

Engagement with physical structures

Physical structures also shaped schools' approaches to action planning in relation to active transport, PE provision, and break and lunch time PA promotion. Some schools were prompted to take advantage of opportunities in their local environment, reflecting their own distinct context, as evident in initiatives based in forests, beaches and rivers:

We are within walking distance of National Park and it is felt that we should make more use of this facility. (School N, action plan)

Where it was considered safe, schools encouraged children to walk and cycle to school using initiatives such as a 'Walking School Bus'. This initiative involved a series of steps including involvement of parents, linking with the Health Services

Executive (HSE), An Garda Siochána (the Irish police force) and local Councils. However, while some schools engaged in dialogue around the provision of cycle paths and footpaths, the majority dismissed this review area as being beyond their control.

Schools without indoor facilities were restricted in breadth and frequency of curriculum delivery. These schools prioritised discretionary time as an opportunity to promote classroom based activities such as 'Bizzy Breaks' (www.irishheart.ie). The shape, size, surfaces and spaces within the school grounds also affected action planning possibilities and prompted suggestions for renovations (School E, action plan).

All schools prioritised changes to the playground environment as an area for development in their action plans. This included zoning of yard areas and provision of equipment, with particular emphasis on infant play areas. In School A, this action was coordinated by the ASF committee and the teacher with special responsibility for PE. Implementation of the action involved liaising with the HSE, the caretaker, teachers and special needs assistants.

Increase in organisational structures

The self-evaluation process prompted schools to develop the PA organisational structures in their schools. This involved the establishment of an inclusive school-based ASF Committee in each school. In addition, scheduling an 'Active School Week' on the annual school calendar was required. Policy and planning requirements literally placed PA 'on the agenda' (School M, action plan) at staff meetings and Board of Management meetings. These organisational structures established PA promotion as an integral part of school life, including whole-school PA assemblies, noticeboards and sections on the school website. For example, School F organised a BOWOW (bus or walk on Wednesday) initiative. This involved liaising with parents to establish a walking bus rota and the initiation of a Wednesday Assembly to celebrate the initiative. Improved organisational structures to support PA participation were implemented: 'an "Imeachtaí Spóirt" [sports happenings] notice board' was to be erected at the main entrance to the school building (School A, action plan). School I described how they organised a monthly assembly where each class group demonstrated an aspect of their PE class. Photographs were then displayed on their PA noticeboard.

Organisational changes were implemented in yard spaces by establishing time-tables for shared equipment, zoning of spaces, activity rotas and initiatives that supported older children to lead playground games with younger children. School K described how they established 'a system for the distribution and collection of the playground equipment' to motivate and encourage PA at break and lunch times. School I described how they acted upon their plan to put a system in place for organised play one day per week:

> One day per week the Student Council will organise games for all classes. They will research playground games, organise equipment and teach the game to the classes during playtime. (School I, action plan)

Increases in organisational structures were also evident in relation to co-curricular sport. This was seen in more formal planning, greater provision, and a wider range of activities and opportunities. While team invasion games still featured prominently, and coaches representing National Governing Bodies (NGB) for sport were closely

involved in the delivery of sport programmes during and after school, some schools appeared to make distinct changes to their co-curricular programmes to make them more inclusive by focusing on the aims of the PE curriculum. School N changed its approach to team competition by fielding additional teams with a focus on inclusion. For some other schools increased PA opportunities continued to equate with opportunities for competitive sport (e.g. School S), albeit across a wider range of activities.

Meanings and understandings

Schools' approaches to PA promotion appeared to be impacted by their understandings of the key concepts within the self-evaluation criteria. This is evident in schools' approaches to promoting 'play'. For the majority of these schools, 'play' was understood as being related to the yard at break and lunch times. Play was not emphasised within PE despite 'play and enjoyment' being a key message of the primary school curriculum. Their interpretations are discussed below in relation to understandings of PE and co-curricular sport, and understandings of inclusion practices.

Understandings of PE and co-curricular sport

Many schools made little distinction between formal PE and other PA promotion opportunities. While some schools (e.g. School S, action plan) were explicit in outlining the commitment of teachers to after-school programmes, others did not distinguish, for example, whether the input of coaches was during discrete PE or at other times during the school day. Evidence that both PE and co-curricular sport were approached from the same value base is seen in how understandings were translated into practice. Examples of this included the use of the words 'teacher' and 'coach' interchangeably in some schools: 'To invite coaches in dance and gymnastics into the school to teach some classes' (School Q, action plan), and the use of PE time for additional coaching for school teams:

> To integrate specialist coaching into the weekly PE sessions (i.e.) hurling, soccer and Gaelic skills...Seek out coaches from the different associations in the local area ...Teachers to attend and supervise sessions to help with teacher up-skilling. Clubs are to provide the teachers with notes for lessons to help with the continuity of the Gaelic, soccer and hurling skills. (School H, action plan)

A consistent approach to PE, PA and co-curricular sport provision is also evident in schools' consideration of how the key messages of the primary school curriculum were addressed within their programmes. The following example illustrates this:

> To prioritise the first key message of the PE curriculum-The importance of enjoyment and play
>
> (a) Playground activities will be introduced at break and lunch-time so equipment will be made available...
> (b) Get feedback from pupils on what they enjoy and don't.
> (c) Pupils will also have the opportunity to use the Sports hall on certain break and lunch times for certain sports...'. (School R, action plan)

Understandings of inclusion practices

The review process promoted schools to reflect critically on aspects of their current PA provision. For example, School B reflected:

> Some aspects of curriculum not enjoyed as much as others by different groups (e.g.: dance) and some children prefer not to interact with others during playtime . . . . (School B, review)

This diagnostic process helped schools to identify gaps in provision and led schools to implement actions to make PE more inclusive (e.g. balance between competitive and non-competitive activities) as well as increasing the variety of PA opportunities available. Inclusivity, grounded in the key messages of the curriculum, was also a basis for action in designing play areas and in the range of co-curricular opportunities on offer:

> To ensure that sports day emphasises the importance of participation and co-operation by children and not just the skills of the child. (School Q, action plan)

School P aimed 'to actively encourage girls to become more enthusiastically involved during PE and after school sports' (action plan). This was implemented by surveying preferred activities, inviting female role models to visit the school, a separate girls' sports day and displays of project work on girls' sports on a noticeboard:

'Celebration' was narrowly interpreted as the acknowledgement of success in competitive sports by some schools. Interpretations of what a 'Sport for All' day consisted of varied widely. School L described their approach:

> organise children into mixed physical ability groups. A team will win medals rather than the same individuals in competitive races. (School L, action plan)

The implementation of the event reflected their approach to 'Sport for All':

> Medals to be ordered for winning team . . . A treat for each child who participates. (School L, action plan)

When schools emphasised inclusion as a core value of their programmes their implementation of 'celebration' reflected a broader interpretation that moved beyond presentation of medals:

> Establish an 'Achievement Board' . . . take photos . . . encourage children to write an account of their accomplishments . . . display photos and children's articles on the 'Achievement Board'. (School P, action plan)

Partnership

A whole-school approach to PA promotion recognises the role of all partners within the school, including children, teachers, parents and other school staff. Outside the school potential PA promotion partners include other local schools, off-site PA centres such as swimming pools and sports complexes, and local sports organisations and PA providers. The central role of the class teachers in the delivery of PE,

co-curricular sport and other PA promotion programmes was evident. Adults other than teachers, a range of NGBs and local organisations were also involved. In isolated cases, the presence of NGB coaches was seen as a way to 'up skill' teachers and to provide an informal source of continuing professional development (CPD). One school, for example, saw potential in teachers 'co-teaching' with the visiting coaches (School I, action plan). Self-evaluation prompted schools to consider who was (and who could become) involved in decision-making around the delivery of PA.

The children were significant partners in the PA promotion processes as illustrated by their involvement in decision-making and examples where older children delivered PA opportunities for younger children. Many of the schools, following the suggestion of an ASF prompt, established a committee of children to give them an active role in decision-making:

> A committee is to be formed consisting of the thirteen pupils from sixth class. They will have the responsibility of organising our 'Active School Week'. They will also provide lessons on healthy eating and exercise for the younger classes. They will also be integral to the success of our Cara Clóis [Friend in the Yard Initiative]. (School A, action plan)

The children's role in decision-making was also encouraged through other means such as the use of an 'ideas box' (School H, action plan). School T described in their review process their current situation and how it might be developed:

> Generally the class teachers allow the children to make an 'either/or' choice of activity. Different pupils are given leadership roles on a rota basis.... To include children more in the decision making process e.g. to allow the children to decide between 2/3 activities at all class levels. (School T, action plan)

Self-evaluation prompted schools to invite parents to participate in the provision of PA opportunities for children. Parents were asked to support walking to school initiatives, sports days, and the training and transportation of school teams. While some schools used a skills audit to explore parents' possible contribution to PA delivery, others considered more practical ways in which parents might provide support during the organisation of sports tournaments (School R, action plan).

Schools sought out partnerships with local clubs, facilities and expertise. This provided opportunities for broadening the existing range of activities on offer. Schools used noticeboards and invited speakers to provide information for pupils on PA opportunities within the local community. Some of the schools considered invitations to local sports teams and individuals as potential role models for the children. School M described an invitation to a past pupil 'to visit the school with some team-mates and give a motivational speech to the children about her experience in sport, what it's like playing football for Dublin, what training is involved...' (School M, action plan).

A partnership approach is evident in how schools accessed CPD opportunities for school staff. For example, selected teachers from each school attended CPD delivered by partners such as the HSE, Local Sports Partnerships and NGBs. It is clear that the partnerships established through the self-evaluation process provide the potential for increasing the quantity and quality of PA promotion in schools. It is important to emphasise that in all cases one generalist class teacher took on an overall leadership role (PE is taught by generalist teachers in Irish primary schools).

This leader within the school coordinated the school's overall approach and acted as a contact with outside partners. The range and extent of this individual's role highlights the importance of PA leadership within the school in ensuring that the potential of these partnerships is realised.

Discussion

The art of the possible?

Our examination of the ASF initiative suggests that self-evaluation and improvement processes have the potential to facilitate change in practices (McNamara and O'Hara 2008; Schildkamp and Visscher 2010; Vanhoof, De Maeyer, and Van Petegem 2011) in primary school PE, PA and co-curricular sporting activities. The ASF process provided a structure that supported development and change in PA provision. There is an old Irish saying that translates as 'The squeaky wheel always gets the most oil'. Through the review process, PA became the 'squeaky wheel' that required attention and that prompted schools to prioritise and invest in PA promotion. For these schools the self-evaluation process focused on developing PA structures and partnerships grounded in shared meanings and understandings. The self-evaluation and self-improvement activities of schools illustrate ways in which the quality and quality of PA opportunities for young people in schools might be improved. This suggests that a whole-school self-directed process of self-evaluation may be a catalyst to increasing PA in primary schools.

Schildkamp and Visscher (2009) highlight the complexities of using self-evaluation instruments in schools and, in particular, emphasise the importance of providing schools with the tools to implement the changes associated with their self-evaluation process. The approaches taken to self-improvement by schools in the ASF process were shaped by (though not limited to) the ASF self-evaluation structure as it is evident that individual school approaches to self-evaluation were shaped by their local context. Examples of this included an activity initiative based around the beach in one school and a fly-fishing initiative in another. In this instance, the voluntary nature of participation combined with the flexible design of the self-evaluation process allowed schools to innovate and make relevant changes based on their local context as demonstrated by the fact that all schools identified areas where PA provision might be enhanced, regardless of school type, size or resources. Schools planned within their resources showing what was possible within the current Irish primary school context. As the ASF process focused schools on the positive and consider what might be possible, the schools were enabled to make PA changes. Interestingly, the use of self-evaluation in schools is currently viewed as a vital process for school improvement and development (DES 2012). Although the motivation for adopting this approach (requiring little resource commitment) within current physically challenging times is in itself worthy of interrogation, it is clear that the self-evaluation approach has the potential to impact positively on PA provision in primary schools.

The ASF documentation is intentionally designed to support the alignment of schools' PA provision with the key messages of the primary school PE curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999) through the compulsory review areas. The success of the ASF initiative in promoting this approach is encouraging, given the gap that has

been highlighted previously between policy and the reality of children's school PE and sport experiences and suggests that it is possible for PE to shape other school PA opportunities, rather than being shaped by them (Green 2000; Penney and Harris 1997). Is it possible that the establishment of the key principles of the PE curriculum as the benchmark for all PA promotion can lead to a better alignment of practices with policies that promote appropriate and inclusive PA experiences for children? Furthermore, the success of requiring alignment with these principles points to the importance of building desired outcomes explicitly into the design of the self-evaluation process. This finding supports the work of Schildkamp and Visscher (2009) in Dutch primary schools. It also prompted them to review existing practices and, in some cases, consider new approaches (e.g. increasing PA opportunities for girls). The self-evaluation process contributed to coordination across provision and creation of shared understandings which may result in more consistent alignment of policy recommendations and practices in schools contexts.

Studies that examine the benefits of a whole-school approach to PA (e.g. Naylor and McKay 2009; Naylor et al. 2006) suggest that it impacts positively on PA participation (McKenna 2009). The ASF mirrors 'active school' models of whole-school PA promotion initiatives in other countries (Hall and McGeorge 2000 in the UK, Sport New Zealand 2012). Actions and activities selected by schools in Ireland (such as yard markings and use of playground equipment) echo examples of good practice provided in other countries such as the 'Active Mark' (www.sportnz.org.nz/Documents/Young%20People/ActiveMark.pdf) in New Zealand. The schools' action planning also reflected current PA policy in Ireland (Department of Health and Children 2009). The whole-school emphasis of the ASF structure suggests that it may provide a possible solution to current concerns about PA provision in primary schools (Layte and McCrory 2011; Woods et al. 2010). All schools were clearly focused on removing barriers to, and increasing opportunities for, participation to get more children, more active, more often. Schools' approaches to the self-evaluation reflect a multidimensional understanding of the purposes of, and approaches to, PA promotion within their school communities. The diversity of approaches taken by schools highlights the importance of recognising the need for policy to accommodate individual approaches and to avoid 'one-size-fits-all' solutions.

While most of the schools actions aligned with the educational values of the PE curriculum, some examples where the school's sporting tradition around representative sport seemed to strongly influence their priorities remind us that imagining what is possible (the review process) can be shaped and in some cases bounded by schools' current approaches. This was particularly evident in relation to extra-curricular activities where in some cases increasing time in PA involved additional training of competitive school teams with less consideration of additional PA opportunities for those not involved in school teams. These practices seem to maintain an adherence to competitive structures that privilege a small number of pupils. The organisation of competitive team games continues to be a prevalent feature of curricular and extra-curricular practice in Irish primary schools (Murray and Millar 2005; Woods et al. 2010). How can these schools be encouraged to provide a wider range of activities for children who are not engaged in competitive school sport? Although an incremental rather than a radical shift towards more balanced and inclusive PA promotion opportunities was evident in the action planning documentation, the culture of

schools and the value placed by them on competitive school representation needs to be acknowledged and accommodated within policy messages that promote inclusive models of school PA participation. Perhaps, exemplars that illustrate practices in other schools may prompt these schools to re-evaluate what is possible in their contexts.

As with any self-evaluation process, it is important to interrogate what might happen once the process is finished. After the ASF has been awarded, does PA continue to be a 'squeaky wheel' that demands attention in these schools? The increase in organisational and physical structures may support the continuation of the PA practices beyond the end of the self-evaluation initiative (Naylor and McKay 2009). Physical changes, for example, to play spaces will certainly remain, and there is potential for structures and partnerships created to continue to support PA promotion. The prioritisation of children's involvement in decision-making and promotion of parental involvement in PA promotion reflect recommended practices in other countries (Sport New Zealand 2012) and may provide direction to sustain the initiative. Further research is required to examine if the actions identified during the self-evaluation process have become embedded in everyday practice and to fully comprehend whether what schools illustrate as possible for a short time during the ASF process is sustainable.

Schools' action planning documents highlight the potential benefits of partnership and collaboration with local communities (e.g. sharing facilities). While there is considerable evidence to suggest that sports coaches are heavily involved in the delivery of PE and school sport in Irish primary schools (e.g. Fahey, Delaney, and Gannon 2005) the descriptions of partnership in the self-evaluation documentation suggests an unproblematic relationship between schools and their local communities. We suggest that a cautious approach should be taken to development of these partnerships taking into account concerns regarding the nature of these partnerships in the literature (Griggs 2010; Lavin, Swindlehurst, and Foster 2008; Reid 2003; Waring and Warburton 2000). Given the complexity of the relationship between external providers and schools (Griggs 2008; Petrie and lisahunter 2011), a more detailed exploration of these partnerships is required to ensure that the intended benefits ensure for all partners. The impact of these partnerships on educational outcomes and PA participation merits further investigation.

It is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of the findings in relation to their transferability to the wider PA context in Irish primary schools. In this study, the schools were all involved in an ASF initiative, which included 11 compulsory review areas. Schools may have prioritised differently if these review areas had not been required. In addition, the participant schools were not a representative sample of all Irish primary schools. However, the findings do give insight on what was possible in these schools and point to the scope for all schools to prioritise and develop PA promotion initiatives. The central role of local context and opportunities in shaping developments was evident in how schools approached the action planning phase. All aspects of the review and action planning process were guided by the ASF template but, ultimately, each school implemented what was workable and valued by their own school community. These insights on how schools approach decision-making around change and development can inform development of the ASF initiative and future self-evaluation strategies targeting PA promotion in primary schools (Tjomsland 2010). In particular, insight on the important role of leadership,

partnership and the need for shared understandings of practice can help shape future developments. The long-term impact and sustainability of these self-evaluation and self-improvement initiatives – as well as the continued prioritisation of PA promotion through self-evaluation initiatives such as the ASF – merit further investigation (e.g. Schildkamp, Visscher, and Luyten 2009).

Conclusion

A planned, systematic and structured self-evaluation and self-improvement process (McNamara and O'Hara 2008) resulted in these primary schools prioritising PA promotion and making changes to their PA provision. This understanding of schools' approaches to self-evaluation highlights the importance of a collaborative approach around PA promotion in primary school contexts. It also illustrates what schools value and view as feasible within their contexts and resources. The self-evaluation process resulted in schools adopting more developmentally appropriate and inclusive approaches to PA provision. While changes to school practices that better reflect educational policy on PA promotion are encouraging, the long-term impact of the self-evaluation and self-improvement processes merit further investigation. Insight on schools' approaches to self-evaluation and self-improvement highlights the importance of establishing shared understandings of practice and supporting a collaborative approach based on these understandings in promoting PA. Self-evaluation and self-improvement processes can contribute to the promotion of whole-school PA in primary schools.

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Appendix 1. Active School Flag Review Areas (shaded areas are compulsary review areas)

Area
Curriculum planning
1. The school has consulted and agreed on a whole school plan for P.E., physical activity and extra-curricular sports. This plan has been sanctioned by the Board of Management and is available to all teachers.
2. The school meets the minimum requirements of one hour discrete time for P.E. per week and makes use of discretionary time.
3. The school meets the requirements of the P.E. Curriculum.
4. The school satisfies the seven key messages of the P.E. Curriculum (listed on p. 2-3 of the PE Teacher Guidelines).
Co-curricular activities
5. The school makes a range of co-curricular activities available to all pupils on an individual and team basis in school.
6. The school's co-curricular programme caters for children of all abilities and provides meaningful inclusion opportunities for all.

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7. The school enlists the assistance of National Governing Bodies (NGBs) in co-curricular provision.

Additional promotion of physical activity

8. The school involves children in the decision making process in relation to physical activity promotion.

9. The school takes steps to promote physical activity during breaks and lunch times.

10. The school helps and encourages pupils to walk and cycle to school where it is safe to do so.

11. The school offers pupils opportunities to celebrate their physical activity skills and achievements.

12. The school organises an Active School Week each year.

Links with the community

13. The school has established links with the local community in terms of the promotion and provision of physical activity.

14. The school informs pupils about physical activity events, facilities and opportunities in the local community.

15. The school avails of local facilities that provide for and promote physical activity opportunities.

16. The school demonstrates the involvement of staff, parents and members of the community in the provision of physical activity.

Qualifications, training and resources

17. The school encourages staff to attend in-service courses and to participate in other forms of continuous professional development (CPD) appropriate to their needs.

18. The school has adequate resources to provide pupils with comprehensive P.E. and co-curricular physical activity programmes.