EFFECTIVENESS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN SPECIALIST AND GENERALIST TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT
The role of the specialist of physical education was introduced in primary school staff for IV and IV classes. For the remaining grades, this subject is still delegated to the generalist teacher, creating a hybrid structure characterized by management challenges and inconsistencies in instruction across different classes. The aim is to investigate the perceptions of specialist and generalist teachers on the effectiveness of the new organizational model implemented by primary schools following Law No. 234 of 2021. A convenience sample of specialist and generalist teachers completed a semi-structured questionnaire. In addition, an e-focus group was conducted on WhatsApp to explore specialists' challenges. The results indicate a positive assessment of the quality of instruction provided by subject-specialist teachers, despite significant organizational challenges related to space management, timetable scheduling, curriculum fragmentation, and the complexity of multi-campus settings. Signs of professional dissatisfaction emerged, particularly among specialists, linked to mobility between school complexes and suboptimal organizational conditions.

KEYWORDS
Management; Health promotion; Curriculum; Primary education; Reform.

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1 Sara Aliberti: methodology, formal analysis and writing – original draft. Francesca D'Elia: investigation, project administration and validation.

1. The Hybrid Structure of Physical Education in Primary School

The role of specialist physical education teacher was introduced into primary school teaching staff a few years ago, initially only in V and subsequently also in IV for two hours a week. For the other classes, this subject is still taught by a generalist teacher, resulting in a hybrid system characterised by organisational challenges and inconsistencies in teaching across the different classes.

Physical activity not only helps to prevent chronic non-communicable diseases but also supports and enhances physical and mental well-being and quality of life across all age groups (Gu et al., 2016; Ostrowska-Nawarycz et al., 2022). According to the Italian National Institute of Health (ISS, 2018), when a habit of physical activity is established from childhood, it tends to become an integral part of a person's lifestyle. The World Health Organisation recommends that children and adolescents aged between 5 and 17 should engage in an average of 60 minutes of physical activity per day (Bull et al., 2020). However, in Italy, children are becoming increasingly sedentary; they have fewer opportunities to socialise with their peers, to develop their motor skills and abilities, as well as their life skills (Aliberti & Manzo, 2023). Schools are becoming formal settings capable of taking effective action to curb this trend (Tomaczkowski & Klonowska, 2020). The two hours of physical education per week represent a unique opportunity, although they meet only a small fraction of children's fundamental need for physical activity. In some cases, school physical education is the only source of physical activity for 60% of school-age children and adolescents (Woynarowska et al., 2015).

The legislation has raised several unresolved issues that could lead to a failure to provide high-quality physical education. The factors that define high-quality physical education include at least 120 minutes of physical activity each week, sufficient sports gear and venues, regular evaluations of students and

educators, assistance from school principals to PE instructors, and a tailored curriculum (UNESCO, 2015). The first key issue concerns the differing educational backgrounds of the two types of teachers (D'Elia, 2023): on the one hand, there is the generalist teacher who has a degree in primary education; on the other, the specialist teacher, who holds a degree in sports science in one of the following three degree categories: LM47 (Sports Management), LM68 (Sports Kinesiologist), LM67, (Kinesiologist of Preventive and Adapted Physical Activities) (Raiola, 2023). The training of generalist teachers, which is largely holistic and non-specialist, leads them to feel inadequately trained to teach physical education lessons, believing that the presence of a specialist is necessary (Morgan & Bourke, 2008). The specialist, on the other hand, feels adequately prepared in terms of methodology and theory, but needs to gain experience in managing school dynamics, which concern not only how the subject is taught, but also interaction with the educational environment as a whole, including relationships with colleagues, families and the school administration (D'Isanto et al., 2025).

The presence of two types of teachers, therefore, leads to unequal treatment among students at the same level (D'Elia, 2023), as IV and V students have the privilege of receiving high-quality physical education taught by a specialist, whilst I, II, III are taught by a generalist teacher who lacks adequate training. This also creates discontinuity in the teaching of this subject, which is considered fundamental for promoting psychophysical and social well-being. Physical education contributes to a child's all-round development by promoting the acquisition of motor skills and the adoption of healthy, active lifestyles. Variations in teachers' qualifications risk undermining the fairness of the educational provision. Another innovative aspect is the new guidelines for planning physical activities in primary schools. The new 2025 National

Guidelines (MIM, 2025), which will come into effect in September 2026, replace the previous ones issued in 2012 (MIUR, 2012). They replace the four thematic areas, namely "the body and its relationship with space and time"; 'the language of the body as a means of communication and expression', 'play, sport, rules and fair play', and 'health, wellbeing, prevention and safety' with five dimensions: 'motor', 'cognitive', 'social', 'emotional' and 'healthy and active behaviours and lifestyles'. The expected competences, specific learning objectives and knowledge are also defined, both at the end of III year and at the end of IV one. The problem is that the structure, which in 2012 was clearer and more practical with its four thematic areas, now runs the risk of becoming overly theoretical and unfocused if not properly translated into the curriculum. We have moved from designing courses and games to designing all-round experiences, with the aim of building motor skills for life.

In light of the new school organisational model, which varies according to different timetable structures, including 24, 27–30 and 40 hours per week, and different types of school, ranging from simple teaching centres to comprehensive schools (D'Isanto, 2023), it is useful to investigate the effectiveness and impact of introducing the role of physical education specialist in primary schools. The aim of the study is to investigate the perceptions of specialist and generalist teachers regarding the effectiveness of the new organisational model implemented by primary schools following Law No. 234 of 2021.

2. Material and methods

Study design and participants. The study design is exploratory, as it aims to understand how physical education instruction in primary schools has evolved

in recent years following the implementation of the relevant law. The sample consists of 98 specialist and generalist teachers working in Italian primary schools, recruited through convenience sampling. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. This study complements a second study focused on school administrators on the same topic, providing a comprehensive overview of how physical education has evolved in primary schools.

Data collection. A semi-structured questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed to participants via email and WhatsApp: the first part of the questionnaire, covering demographic and background information, was the same for both teachers, while the section on perceptions was slightly modified, retaining some common items to allow for comparison of responses. Overall, the questionnaire consisted of 8 background questions, 13 closed-ended questions on a 5-point Likert scale to investigate their perceptions regarding physical education instruction, and 1 open-ended question regarding any organizational challenges encountered. A detailed description is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Questionnaire for students on the effectiveness of the organisational model implemented in recent years.

Item	Answers
Age	• Numerical form
Years of experience	• Numerical form
Kind of teacher	• Generalist • Specialist
Kind of institute	• Omni-comprehensive school • Comprehensive school • Didactic site • Other
Number of primary school sites within the school	• Numerical form

Has the school undergone mergers or restructuring in recent years?	• Yes • No
Are there different timetable models across your institute?	• Yes • No
What timetable models are present in your institute?	• 24 hours • 27 hours • 30 hours • 40 hours / full-time
For Specialists: Please answer by assigning a value from 1 to 5 for each statement	
1. The current organization of physical education has a positive impact on my professional well-being.	
2. Managing facilities poses a real challenge when conducting physical education classes.	
3. The presence of multiple school complexes and/or mergers has a negative impact on the quality of my work.	
4. The scheduling of classes creates difficulties in managing my professional activities.	
5. Managing students during physical education classes is complex under the current organizational structure.	
6. The expectations and requests of families affect the management of physical education activities.	
7. The coexistence of a specialist teacher and a generalist teacher in teaching the same subject creates difficulties in maintaining continuity in instruction.	
8. The co-teaching model with other teachers is more effective than teaching individually.	
9. The new 2025 National Guidelines are clear and useful for planning physical education activities.	
10. Extending the role of the specialist teacher to all primary school classes would represent an improvement over the current model	
11. I feel adequately trained to teach physical education classes in the gym	
12. I feel adequately trained to teach physical education classes in the classroom or other spaces	
13. Children prefer activities in the gym to those in the classroom	
For Generalists: Please answer by assigning a value from 1 to 5 for each statement	
1. The introduction of the specialist teacher has made organizing my work schedule more complex.	
2. Managing the facilities poses a real challenge when conducting physical education classes.	
3. The presence of multiple school complexes and/or mergers has a negative impact on the quality of my work.	
4. The initial introduction of the specialist teacher exclusively in fifth-grade classes created organizational and instructional challenges.	

5.	Extending the program to fourth and fifth grades has increased organizational and instructional difficulties.
6.	The previous model, based on projects led by sports tutors, was more effective than the current organization.
7.	The coexistence of specialist and generalist teachers in teaching the same subject creates difficulties in maintaining instructional continuity.
8.	I believe I possess the appropriate skills to provide quality physical education.
9.	The new 2025 National Guidelines are clear and useful for planning my activities.
10.	Extending the specialist teacher to all grades in primary school would represent an improvement over the current model.
11.	I feel adequately trained to teach physical education classes in the gym
12.	I feel adequately trained to teach physical education classes in the classroom or other spaces
13.	Children prefer activities in the gym rather than in the classroom
Open question: What are the main strengths and weaknesses of the current physical education program?	

E-focus group. An e-focus group was conducted on the WhatsApp platform to conduct a qualitative analysis of the main challenges emerging among subject-matter teachers. E-focus groups are discussions facilitated by online tools for exchanging ideas on solutions that must meet the requirements of a specific problem (Montoya-Weiss et al., 1998). The researcher served as moderator and, by asking a few general questions, such as “How do you feel about your role as specialists in primary school?”, sparked a discussion among the participants. This discussion yielded interesting and relevant insights regarding their working conditions in recent years and comparisons with other school levels. This methodology has proven particularly useful, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and previous results have demonstrated the feasibility of applying this model (Dunque et al., 2021).

Statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' responses as percentages. The interview findings were summarized and grouped by theme. The data were analyzed using SPSS software.

3. Results and discussion of the main findings

A total of 98 teachers responded to the questionnaire, including 52 subject specialists and 46 generalists. 72.4% worked in comprehensive schools, while the remaining 27.6% worked in school districts or other types of schools. Furthermore, half of the participants stated that their school had undergone mergers or downsizing in recent years. 81% reported that there are different scheduling models among the various school complexes, likely to accommodate the needs of different types of students. Seventy-four percent believe that the current organization of physical education does not contribute to their well-being at work. According to 78.8%, space management is a major issue that affects how physical education is delivered. 82.6% state that the presence of multiple school complexes and mergers undermines the quality of their work, highlighting significant difficulties related to the organization of the school schedule. Regarding classroom management, 69.2% of specialists report facing difficulties, and the expectations and demands of families exacerbate these challenges. Several teachers have expressed concerns about injuries and potential complaints from parents, which they perceive as a source of occupational stress. Furthermore, 71.1% of subject specialists believed that having both a subject specialist and a generalist teacher in the classroom creates difficulties in maintaining continuity in the teaching of the subject. At the same time, 64.3% viewed the co-teaching model favorably, considering it

more effective than individual teaching, likely due to the management of the class group. 80% are in favor of extending the specialist teacher model to all primary school classes.

Turning to generalist teachers, the survey found that 63.0% considered organizing their work schedule to be complex following the introduction of specialist teachers. However, only 38.4% perceived space management as a concrete difficulty, likely because many generalist teachers tend to conduct physical education activities in the classroom. Fifty-eight percent of generalist teachers felt that the initial introduction of specialist teachers in fifth-grade classes alone created organizational and instructional difficulties, a percentage that rose to 67.4% with the expansion to fourth and fifth grades. Furthermore, 46.2% stated that the previous model based on sports tutors was simpler or more effective than the current organization. Regarding instructional continuity, 62.8% of generalists acknowledged that the coexistence of specialists and generalists can create difficulties in teaching the subject. However, only 34.7% stated that they possessed adequate skills to provide quality physical education. 89.1% of generalists are in favor of extending the specialist teacher to all grades in primary school. As regards the New National Guidelines 2025, only 53.0% of subject-specific teachers consider them clear and useful enough for planning instructional activities, compared to 68.9% of generalist teachers. There is a need for greater clarity on this matter to make the best use of them.

A comparison of the views of these two groups of teachers reveals that specialist teachers are more acutely aware of the issues related to the structure, organization, and interpersonal dynamics of the current school system. This may be due to their direct involvement in managing physical activities. Generalist ones, while recognizing the value of physical education,

tend to adopt more cautious and less defined approaches. They feel unprepared to lead gym sessions and have limited training for classroom activities, while specialized teachers feel well-prepared for gym classes but less so for classroom instruction. In both cases, teachers believe that students prefer gym activities. However, it is widely recognized that various Italian institutions are lacking gym facilities and secure areas for students to move freely. This issue has been pointed out by Sport and Salute (2024), making it challenging to provide mandatory physical education. As a result, there is a need to reconsider physical activity and the importance of providing resources to enhance non-traditional spaces.

The e-focus group created via WhatsApp made it possible to examine the main issues perceived by special education teachers. The conversation revealed a shared sense of organizational stress and professional burnout, particularly among those who work at multiple schools. Many report difficulties related to frequent travel between different locations, emphasizing how such situations negatively impact both the quality of teaching and their mental well-being. Quite a few teachers are considering transitioning to middle or high school through certification programs, believing that the primary school environment is more difficult to manage and navigate. An issue that frequently arises is that of space management. Many teachers have noted that, in comprehensive schools, the gym is often shared with the lower secondary school, causing organizational problems and restrictions on the use of space. Some experts have reported that they are able to spend only one hour a week in the gym, while other activities are moved to the classroom in the form of theory lessons or low-intensity exercises.

Given that children are no longer as manageable or well-behaved as they once were, some teachers choose to prioritize theoretical or structured activities to

curb undesirable behaviour and reduce the risk of accidents, a decision that is also influenced by pressure from families. The focus group highlighted that the integration of a specialized teacher requires greater organizational, structural, and institutional support to be truly sustainable and effective within the primary school setting.

4. Concluding Reflections

The results show a positive assessment of the quality of instruction provided by subject-specific teachers. However, there are significant organizational challenges related to space management, scheduling, curriculum fragmentation, and the complexity of multi-campus settings. There are also signs of dissatisfaction among teachers, particularly subject-specific teachers, stemming from mobility between different campuses and suboptimal organizational conditions. The new 2025 National Guidelines are perceived as lacking clarity, contributing to increased uncertainty in instructional planning. The research offers useful insights for improving the organizational model and for a possible future implementation of specialist teachers in all primary school classrooms.

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