HEADMASTERS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE INTRODUCTION OF THE SPECIALIST TEACHER IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL: ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT
Law of 30 December 2021 no. 234 introduced the role of specialist teacher in physical education, in V and IV classes of primary school. The aim is to investigate perceptions and opinions of primary school headmasters on quality of physical education within the new hybrid structure. A convenience sample of headmasters completed an ad hoc-questionnaire composed of 10 questions on a 5-point Likert scale, covering teaching quality and organizational challenges. The results show that headmasters have a positive view of the quality of physical education provided by the specialist teachers; however, several issues emerged, including use of facilities, timetable planning and fragmentation of the curriculum between specialist and generalist teachers. The new 2025 National Guidelines also increased confusion as they are more nuanced and less clearly defined. Extending the specialist teachers to all classes could resolve some issues, but accompanied by organizational and infrastructural measures, ensuring high-quality physical education.

KEYWORDS
Children; curriculum; teaching methods; educational leadership; health promotion.

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1. The introduction of the specialist teacher in primary school

The Law of 30 December 2021, no. 234 (2021), introduced the role of specialist teacher in physical education in primary schools, for the 2022/2023 academic year only in Year V and, for the 2023/2024, also in Year IV. The specialist teacher is someone who has obtained a master's degree in Exercise and Sports Sciences in one of the following three degree categories: LM47, which qualifies the holder for the profession of Sports Manager; LM67, which qualifies the holder for the profession of Kinesiologist in preventive and adapted motor activities; and LM68, which qualifies the holder for the profession of Sports Kinesiologist (Raiola et al., 2023). This initial difference in training, as analysed in a previous study (D'Isanto, 2023), has inevitably led to unequal treatment between students at the same educational level, where the first years of primary school undertake physical education with a generalist teacher, a role often perceived as unsuitable for leading physical activities, whilst the final years undertake physical activities with a specialist in that discipline. The perception of inadequacy on part of generalist teachers is a very common finding in the literature (D'Elia, 2023; Freak & Miller, 2017; Nioda & Tagare 2024) due to the holistic and cross-disciplinary university training they have received, as opposed to the specific training of graduates in sports science. Beyond the issue of training, there is also the problem of the risk of accidents, inadequate facilities and equipment, or personal health issues. Even the specialist, who in recent years had joined the school staff as an external sports tutor through projects such as '*Scuola Attiva Kids'*, considered their training to be 'fairly' or 'moderately' adequate, mainly due to a lack of experience (D'Isanto et al., 2025), as well as a series of shortcomings related to space and equipment, and issues with classroom management.

The headmasters must face several challenges in creating and managing an environment that promotes high-quality physical education (Rainer et al., 2012). On an administrative level, the legislation has transformed the Italian school organisational model, which had previously been more uniform and centred on the role of the generalist teacher, responsible for all subjects including physical education, operating within different timetables, from 24 to 27–30 or 40 hours per week (D'Elia, 2019). The introduction of a separate role within the primary school staff has altered some organisational balances in terms of timetables, co-teaching and space management, particularly in comprehensive schools. In fact, physical education hours are additional to the standard timetable (24-30 hours), but form part of the full-time model of 40 hours. As regards the standard timetable, the specialist teacher is a classroom teacher, whereas in the full-time model, they are supported by a generalist, usually teaching Italian or mathematics, as these are the predominant subjects. Where necessary, the specialist teacher is supported by a support teacher, if provided for in a student's Individualised Education Plan (PEI), or by an educator, with a view to promoting physical inclusion (UNESCO, 2015).

The type of institution in which the primary school is situated can influence the organisation of the spaces and resources allocated to physical education, particularly when there are different school levels within a single institution. The educational district is an autonomous structure that manages only nursery and primary school complexes. The comprehensive school is a school that brings together three levels of education under the same management, namely nursery, primary and lower secondary, to ensure educational continuity. The comprehensive school follows the same structure as above, but with the addition of upper secondary education. Consequently, the sharing of indoor and outdoor spaces and sports halls, where available, between different school

levels requires a high degree of organisational skill on the part of the school complex and level coordinators in managing teachers' timetables, to ensure that everyone can make use of them.

Another important issue is that of school size, the regulations for which were introduced by the 2023 Budget Law (Law 197/2022) and updated by subsequent decrees, with the aim of adapting the school system to the decline in student numbers in Italy (Art. 1, 557-559). This procedure involves the legal merger of certain schools to achieve an average of 900–1.000 pupils per school. In other words, it is the process through which the Regions reorganise and rationalise the network of educational institutions, by merging and redistributing school complexes, in accordance with the territorial and organisational needs of the school system. The merger of two schools results in the loss of a headteacher, and over time also of administrative staff and support staff. Today in Italy there are around 350 schools under temporary management, accounting for almost 5% of all schools (Lattes Editori, 2025).

However, this decision appears to be driven more by cost-saving considerations than by educational quality, to the detriment of specialist teachers who, to meet the requirement of 22 hours per week plus 2 hours of lesson planning, find themselves having to move constantly between school sites. Now that three years have passed since the introduction of the role of physical education specialist in primary schools, it is useful to investigate the perspective of school leaders, who are the main implementers of the reform within educational institutions. The introduction of the new organisational model may have led to challenges related to the management of spaces, timetables and educational continuity, particularly in contexts characterised by multiple school complexes and different organisational models. Consequently, the aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions and opinions of primary school headmasters

regarding the quality of physical education within the new hybrid structure, in which specialist teachers in the final years coexist with generalist teachers in the first grades.

2. Material and methods

Study design and participants. This is an exploratory study, as it aims to investigate headmasters' perceptions and opinions regarding the organisational model implemented following the mandatory introduction of physical education taught by specialist teachers. A convenience sample was used to recruit 30 school leaders working in primary education in Italy. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data collection. A semi-structured questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed to participants via email. Specifically, the questionnaire consisted of three sections: an introductory section comprising eight questions; a specific section regarding their perceptions and opinions on the organisational model implemented following the mandatory introduction of physical education, comprising ten questions with response options on a 5-point Likert scale; and an open-ended question addressing the various critical issues encountered in recent years. A detailed description is shown in Table 1.

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

	Age	• **Numerical form**
	Years of experience as headmaster	• Numerical form
	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
	Please answer by assigning a value from 1 to 5 for each statement	
1.	**The introduction of specialist teachers has made it more difficult to draw up the school timetable.**	
2.	**The management of facilities (gyms/outdoor spaces) presents a significant challenge.**	
3.	**The presence of multiple school complexes/mergers has a negative impact on the organisation of physical education.**	
4.	**The initial introduction of specialist teachers in Year V classes alone created organisational challenges.**	
5.	**Extending this to Year IV and Year V classes has created organisational challenges.**	
6.	**The previous model, based on physical education projects without specialist teachers, was more effective than the current organisation.**	
7.	**The coexistence of specialist and generalist teachers in teaching the same subject creates difficulties in maintaining continuity of teaching.**	

8.	**The specialist teacher improves the quality of physical education teaching compared to the generalist**
9.	**The new 2025 National Guidelines are clear and useful for the organisation and planning of activities, including physical education**
10.	**Extending the role of the specialist physical education teacher to all primary school classes would represent an improvement on the current model.**
	Open question: What do you consider to be the main strengths and the main challenges identified following the inclusion of specialist teachers in the school staff?

Statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the closed-ended questions as percentages. Thematic analysis was used to summarise the results of the open-ended questions. The data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

3. Results and discussion of the main findings and future perspectives

Thirty headteachers from lower secondary schools responded to the questionnaire. The majority oversee multi-school complexes (66.7%), followed by school clusters, with 10% heading comprehensive schools. 60% of the schools had undergone mergers or restructuring in recent years, and in 63.3% of cases, different timetable models were in place across the various school complexes.

Consequently, several headteachers find themselves having to manage not only different school complexes but also different timetable models. For example, one headteacher reported finding themselves in charge of two merged comprehensive schools, one of which followed a 40-hour timetable (i.e. full-time) and the other a 27-hour timetable. This makes it very difficult to draw up a suitable school timetable that considers both the available space and the well-being of cross-curricular teachers, including the physical education

teacher. The latter, working only in Years 4 and 5 with two hours per week per class, across a total of 11 classes, is often forced to move between different school complexes to cover the required number of hours. It is not easy to find a school with 11 IV and V classes concentrated in one or two neighbouring school complexes. This situation differs from that of other cross-curricular staff, such as the religious education teacher, who, working in all primary school classes, can organise their timetable in a more functional and continuous manner within the school complexes. The extension of specialist teaching to all primary school classes could contribute to greater organisational and educational continuity, reducing the fragmentation of the timetable and the need to move between different school sites. It is no coincidence that the majority (70%) strongly agree that the introduction of specialist teachers has made timetable planning more complex, and 76% state that the presence of multiple school clusters/mergers has a negative impact on organisation. 58% agree with the challenges faced when specialist teachers were initially introduced in V classes only; this percentage rises by 15% when IV classes are also involved, as this requires managing more classes and their respective teachers.

Eighty percent strongly agree that managing space is a challenge, a situation felt most acutely by schools catering for multiple age groups. Consider, for instance, a single gym that must be shared between primary, secondary and high school pupils, or the complete lack of safe spaces, such as hallways or playgrounds, where pupils can move about freely. It is no coincidence, as highlighted by Sport & Salute (2024), that over 40% of Italian primary schools (around 6,000 buildings) lack an indoor gym, particularly in Southern Italy, making it difficult to deliver compulsory physical education. This leads to a rethinking of physical activity and the need for measures to equip

unconventional spaces. According to data from the Ministry of Education (2022), subsequently highlighted by *Orizzonte Scuola* (Carlino, 2023), in the South, 4 out of 10 schools have no gym and 66% of primary school children are unable to take part in physical education.

More than half believe that the previous project-based model was no longer effective (62%). Previously, a sports tutor was present once a week and was viewed by both teachers and pupils as operating outside the school's organisational framework. This situation does not allow for adequate understanding of the pupils, the personalisation of teaching approaches, or the development of a continuous educational pathway aimed at promoting healthy and active lifestyles, as envisaged by the objectives of the PNRR, which states: "*In order to achieve the objectives of the PNRR and promote among young people, from primary school onwards, the adoption of behaviours and lifestyles conducive to harmonious growth, health, psychological and physical well-being and the full development of the individual, physical education is introduced as a curricular subject in primary school, in IV and V, to be taught by teachers holding the appropriate qualification and belonging to the relevant competitive examination category for Physical Education and Sports in primary school".* Eighty-eight percent are very much in favour of extending specialist teaching to all year groups in primary school.

As for the dual teaching structure, 67% believe that having both specialist and generalist teachers can create difficulties in ensuring continuity of teaching, precisely because of the disparity in treatment between pupils at the same educational level. It should be noted that the remaining respondents do not consider this structure to be a problem, perhaps due to the view that younger children still require a holistic and general education. Ninety percent believe that specialist teachers improve the quality of teaching; therefore, there is

widespread awareness of the importance of specific training for teaching physical education. As for the new 2025 National Guidelines (MIM, 2025), which replace those of 2012 (MIUR, 2012), some interesting findings have emerged: 54% consider them unclear and difficult to implement. The new curriculum structure is organised by domains, such as physical, cognitive, social, emotional-relational, and healthy and active behaviours/lifestyles. It also defines the expected competences, specific learning objectives and knowledge both at the end of III and V year. The problem lies in the structure, which in 2012 was clearer and more practical with its four thematic areas, while now there is a risk that these aspects will become overly theoretical and unfocused if they are not properly incorporated 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.

The open-ended responses highlighted issues relating to the management of spaces and timetables, particularly in schools that have undergone mergers, resulting in multiple sites and different school levels. There are difficulties in drawing up a timetable that is suitable for delivering high-quality physical education. Furthermore, the priority is often to ensure safety and class coverage, with the quality of the subjects taking a back seat. The strengths lie in the structured and effective activities proposed by specialists with specific expertise, which increase pupils' engagement and satisfaction.

The study aims to provide the perspective of school leaders regarding the organisational difficulties arising from the introduction of the role of physical education specialist solely in IV and V classes of primary school, with a view to identifying solutions and possible strategies to ensure the well-being of

teachers and pupils and to provide a high-quality education. It is necessary to work on the adaptation of spaces, which will be even more essential should the role of specialist be extended to all years of primary school.

4. Concluding Reflections

The results show that school leaders have a positive view of the quality of physical education provided by specialist teachers; however, a number of issues have emerged regarding the organisational management of the model, including the use of facilities, timetable planning, and the fragmentation of the curriculum between specialist and generalist teachers. Problems have also emerged regarding the interpretation of the new 2025 national guidelines, which increase confusion as they are more nuanced and less clearly defined. The possible extension of specialist teachers to all primary school classes could resolve some of the critical issues of the current model, but this must be accompanied by organisational and infrastructural measures capable of ensuring high-quality physical education.

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