What is this research about?
An ongoing debate in physical education (PE) is whether it is better to have specialist teachers (teachers who focussed on special education in their undergraduate degree), rather than generalist teachers, deliver PE programs to elementary students.

This research investigated whether PE specialists deliver more PE lessons and provide increased opportunities for moderate and vigorous physical activity than generalist teachers. The researchers also examined whether specialist or generalist PE teachers had any impact on perceptions of Physical activity within the broader school, and whether either teacher had an impact on the engagement of students in extracurricular physical activities, such as intramural sports, offered within a school. Intramural sports are open to all students, whereas inter-school sports are only open to a select group of students who are required to ‘try out’ for a team.

What you need to know:
The majority of elementary physical education classes in Ontario’s schools are delivered by generalists teachers. This study investigating the benefits and drawbacks of generalist versus specialist physical education teachers found that both teachers deliver the same amount of physical education activities to students, and engage students in the same level of vigorous activity. However, the researchers also found that specialist physical education teachers had a more positive impact on perceptions of physical activity within the school, and in students’ participation in intramural sports.

What did the researchers do?
The researchers developed a survey questionnaire that was distributed to 599
Public and Catholic elementary schools in Ontario, of which 512 were completed and formed the basis for this study.

Questionnaires were completed by physical education teachers, principals, and classroom teachers. These respondents answered questions about intramural and inter-school programs, barriers to physical education programs (training, morale), frequency and duration of physical education classes as well as the level of vigorous activity provided to students during the week.

The researchers compared survey responses from schools using specialist PE teachers to teach physical education classes within their schools, with survey responses from schools that used generalist teachers.

What did the researchers find?
The researchers found that the majority of physical education classes in Ontario’s elementary schools (63%) were delivered by generalist teachers. There were no significant differences found between schools using specialist versus generalist PE teachers when it came to:

- the number of PE classes offered to students per week;
- the number of minutes dedicated to physical education per week;
- the level of vigorous activity offered to students per week.

However, the researchers found that staff within schools using generalist PE teachers perceived that the lack of training of generalist teachers was a barrier to providing PE within these schools.

The researchers also found that schools using specialist teachers:

- Had a higher level of student participation in intramurals (although there was not a significant increase in student participation in school sports teams).

One limitation of this study, noted by the researchers, is that this study did not assess the quality of the physical activity experiences provided by these teachers. In other words, it may be that one group of PE teachers (specialist or generalist) delivers PE more effectively to students.
However, this was not something the researchers investigated.

**How can you use this research?**
School administrators will want to consult the wider body of research on physical education in elementary schools and may wish to use this research to help reassure those concerned about generalist teachers teaching PE within elementary schools, as these teachers were found to provide students with the same rigour and number of hours of PE than specialist teachers. However, administrators and PE teachers may also want to consider some of the extended benefits of hiring specialist PE teachers, as these teachers seem to have a positive impact on the broader perception of physical activity within the school and a positive influence on student participation in intramural sports.

Administrators and teachers concerned with improving student participation in intramurals will find that this research supports employing specialist PE teachers in schools.

**Original Article**
To learn more about this research study, we invite you to read the original article:


**About the researchers:**
At the time this research article was published:

Guy Faulkner was an Associate Professor at the University of Toronto;

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Keywords:
Physical Education (PE), physical activity, physical exercise, elementary education

About this summary
The Ontario Education Research Exchange (OERE) is a project of the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research, an Ontario network promoting the use of research in education. The OERE’s clear language summaries of academic research aim to support this mandate.

This summary has been adapted from the ResearchSnapshot series developed by York University and ResearchImpact and has been developed according to writing and design principles unique to OERE. For more information about this summary or the OERE network please contact oere.knaer.oise@utoronto.ca.

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