

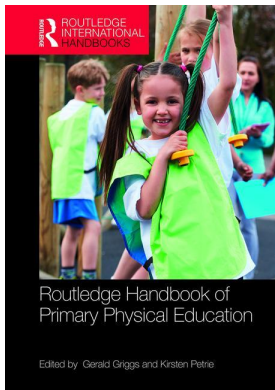
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### **Significant Factors that Affect Young Children Negotiating Transition from Primary to Secondary Physical Education**

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# SIGNIFICANT FACTORS THAT AFFECT YOUNG CHILDREN NEGOTIATING TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO SECONDARY PHYSICAL EDUCATION

*Paul Rainer*

## **Introduction – what is a transition?**

The significance of the transition from primary to secondary school in the United Kingdom (UK) and its equivalent elsewhere has been depicted both as one of the most difficult in pupils' educational careers (Zeedyk, Gallacher, Henderson & Lindsay, 2003) and as a “key rite of passage” (Pratt & George, 2005: 16) in young people's lives. Transition is often defined as “circumstances often arising from social and biological events that disrupts previously existing social equilibria” (Caspi & Moffit, 1991: 157). The term *transition* represents the time when a pupil moves between schools, usually primary to secondary, and presents children with a period of temporary adjustment that is complex and multi-dimensional, resulting in a number of social, personal and physical challenges (Elliot & Punch, 1991).

Indeed children feel excited, optimistic and anxious prior to Key Stage 3 (KS3 is the beginning of secondary school education, ages 11–14 years) (Dismore, 2008), and many express positive attitudes towards their new environment before and after the transition. It is often accompanied by optimism and anticipation of new opportunities, and it can also be viewed as a challenge and a threat, with children welcoming opportunities for new social experiences (Lucey & Reay, 2000). Indeed, children perceive social acceptance to be of great importance and critically identify “fitting in” (Chedzoy & Burden, 2005). Furthermore, this represents a period where any previously established social hierarchy is challenged and where pupils may no longer be the best academic, eldest pupil, most popular or best-performing athlete. Significantly, this re-structure of the social hierarchy at the start of secondary education has the capacity to initiate feelings of anonymity and irrelevance for young children; self-concept can seriously decline (Tonkin & Watt, 2003) and impose lasting ramifications on academic performance and health and well-being (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000). In addition, there is a lack of understanding of when transition starts and ends and often becomes nothing more than an obligatory event in the summer term rather than representative of an event that should be viewed as longer term, well planned and thought out (Fabian, 2002). Although numerous articles have explored the impact on the transition from primary to secondary school (Galton, Gray & Ruddick, 1999; West,

Sweeting & Young, 2010), very little research exists on the significance of the transition process on young children's experiences in physical education (PE) and subsequent lifelong physical activity.

Often school transition programmes are based on the transmission of administrative and organisational procedures, rather than personal, social, emotional or physical attributes (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Indeed, research on school transition has revealed that information is not exchanged consistently between secondary and feeder primary schools (Capel, Zwodiak-Myers & Lawrence, 2004). Furthermore, a lack of continuity and progression in learning of pupils as they move from primary to secondary school has been implicated as a longstanding weakness of the education system (Ofsted, 2002), culminating in a PE experience for young children that is repetitive, uninspiring and underestimates the potential physical movement capabilities of the pupils.

To minimize the impact of transition within PE and to ensure that the 'rite of passage' that a child both expects and perceives is progressive and seamless, schools will integrate a number of strategies to provide a rewarding and enjoyable experience. These could include continuity of delivery and curriculum, progression bridges, transfer of information, collaboration and partnership working with a secondary school and developing competency in fundamental movement. However, research would suggest that transition and PE is often neglected, the curriculum demonstrates discontinuity, secondary PE teachers ignore what primary teachers have taught previously and little support and collaboration is offered. Therefore, the result is often a 'stop-start' curriculum for PE that reflects a lack of progression and consistency, a spiralling curriculum that lacks focus and consideration of the National Curriculum and young children that receive inadequate experiences in their PE lessons and a resulting lack of movement competency to fully engage in the secondary PE curriculum.

The purpose of this chapter is to recognise that young children as a consequence of their physical education are presented with a transition between primary and secondary school and the impact of this can have a significant influence on them socially, physically, emotionally and psychologically and their long-term future physical activity, both positively and negatively.

### **The significance of transition on physical activity**

The combination of a decline in fitness standards of young people and the substantial increase in the prevalence of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents around the world (Eisenman, 2006) has undoubtedly presented a major concern for the young people of today. In recognition of this, schools and in particular PE have been identified as key settings for the promotion of physical activity (Naylor & McKay, 2009) and potentially a valuable resource in combating sedentary lifestyles (Bailey & Dismore, 2005). Indeed, research suggests that it is the primary school years that are crucial in fostering young children's interest and enthusiasm in the concept of physical activity (James & Johnston, 2004). Despite this, currently there is a large variation in the quality of children's experiences, both across and within primary schools (Rainer, Cropley, Jarvis & Griffiths, 2012), and a number of research articles have raised concerns regarding the quality of PE teaching specifically in primary schools (Morgan & Hansen, 2007).

However, the provision and delivery of high-quality PE experiences can be affected by many factors, some of which may assist or hinder delivery and participation. In particular this is evident within primary PE where many institutional barriers, including reduced time provision in the curriculum, poor facilities, the absence of PE professionals (Pickup & Price, 2007), lack of support from head teachers (Rainer et al., 2012) and lack of guidance and support from secondary PE teachers (Lance, 1994), will all culminate in affecting children's experiences of PE in the secondary school. Despite primary school PE having been identified as an integral part of the

process of developing lifelong physical fitness, the subject currently is viewed as a 'low priority subject' amongst teachers (Morgan & Hansen, 2007).

Although it is acknowledged that there are instances of high-quality provision, it appears widely accepted that primary school teachers are unable to develop sufficient expertise in the range of curriculum subjects they are expected to teach, in particular PE (Carney & Winkler, 2008). Critically, though it is recognised that PE within primary education has much to offer and can significantly contribute to lifelong physical activity, it continues to be overlooked in relation to other subjects (Haydn-Davies, Jess & Pickup, 2007). In recognition of this, schools are being called upon to give greater attention to their PE programmes (Naylor & McKay, 2009) to ensure that young children are able to sustain lifelong physical activity beyond the primary years.

### **The role of fundamental movement competency in supporting transition**

Of concern, the most recent OFSTED report (2013) commented on primary PE teachers' insufficient subject knowledge contributing to their inability to deliver the step-by-step approach in teaching skills and lack of awareness of the standards expected of pupils at the end of each key stage. As a result, the contribution of PE specialists in secondary schools may come too late to affect children's competence, motivation and attitude to physical education. Nevertheless, although the primary school provides a crucial context for regular and structured movement experiences that will provide opportunity to acquire movement competency, criticism of the status of physical education in the primary setting should be noted (Gard & Fry, 1997). Indeed, the National Curriculum (NC) for PE for primary schools (2013) articulates that pupils should develop competence and confidence in Fundamental Movement Skill (FMS) in a range of challenging situations across different physical activities. Critically, the primary PE curriculum recognises the importance of progressively consolidating and developing movement patterns both in isolation and combination. Indeed, research indicates that early learning experiences, particularly in primary school children, are crucial to their continuation in physical activity (Sport Wales, 2008), and furthermore, the primary years provide the opportunity for pupils to learn pre-requisite fundamental movement skills essential to lifelong physical development (Gallahue & Ozmun, 1998). In particular, a failure to engage children at this critical time in appropriate high-quality PE provision prior to the transition to secondary education is likely to result in inadequate development of basic movement competence, or FMS (Lubans, Morgan, Cliff, Barnett & Okely, 2010; Rainer et al., 2012).

The current issues related to the teaching of primary PE exacerbate the situation such that Jefferson-Buchanan (2011) suggested that many young children are unlikely to have fully refined their FMS as a result of a number of complex factors impinging on the quality of the teaching of PE in the primary school that affect the physical development process. Furthermore, Ryrrie, Money, Holland, Sibley and Fairclough (2011) reported that primary PE teachers' knowledge of FMS suggested that there was considerable ambiguity regarding the use of and understanding of the concept and this could potentially affect young children's subsequent development of FMS. Moreover, children who fail to master competency in FMS are more likely to experience a failure in the motor domain and less likely to participate in sport and games during childhood and adolescence (Hardy, Reynolds, Zask & Okely, 2010) and more importantly secondary physical education. And yet, worryingly, a common misconception generally exists that would suggest the developmental concept of FMS is determined by maturational stages, and therefore young children 'naturally' learn FMS and are influenced little by the task, practitioner or environment (Gallahue & Ozmun, 1998). Although a growing body of evidence would refute this suggestion and endorse that children do not 'naturally' obtain proficiency in FMS (Goodway & Branta, 2003)

and crucially the acquisition of FMS is developmentally sequenced and is contingent upon multiple internal and external factors (biological, social, psychological, motivational) (Hardy et al., 2010). Nevertheless, failure to take advantage of this sensitive period in childhood will make it increasingly more difficult to attain a higher level of motor skill proficiency later in life and at recognised key transitional phases (Gallahue & Ozmun, 1998), such as the progression from primary to secondary education.

It would seem that competence in FMS is critical to a young child's lifelong physical fitness, and their initial experiences and opportunities within primary PE are significant in supporting a seamless progression to secondary PE. Notwithstanding, those with responsibility within the formative years of primary education to ensure young children acquire and develop FMS typically are generalist teachers, and this provides a significant challenge, often resulting in PE not being taught to the desired and prescribed standard of quality outlined through the NC (Sloan, 2010).

### **Teaching primary PE and the contribution to transition**

Traditionally within primary education PE has been taught by a generalist class teacher (Garrett & Wrench, 2007), with limited contribution from a specialist primary PE teacher, and this raises further concerns. Although the NC for PE provides the structural framework for PE, as well as guidance on the content, it is the physical educator who has a pivotal role in establishing the appropriate learning environment and developing positive attitudes towards PE (Luke & Sinclair, 1991). For far too long it has been documented that the generalist PE teacher has received minimal preparation and hence, often feels inadequately prepared to teach PE (Faulkner, Reeves & Chedzoy, 2008). Indeed, this inadequate and inappropriate preparation often serves as a barrier to effectively achieving the expectations and outcomes identified within the PE curricula. As a result generalist primary teachers do not perceive themselves to be adequately prepared to teach physical education in their initial teacher education, having only received a total of six hours of PE-specific subject/content knowledge throughout the whole of their initial teacher training (Blair & Capel, 2008), giving rise to low levels of confidence amongst those who teach PE (Green, 2008).

What appears to be crucial for educators is how they present physical activities to children in the primary school and in what form this might take, and this has contributed to long-standing disputes over the inherent nature and purpose of physical education per se within the primary school (Jefferson-Buchanan, 2011). Furthermore, it could be argued that the esoteric nature of 'PE knowledge' itself causes confusion, conflict and counter-productivity within the primary school, often with teachers not confident in what to teach or unsure of a structured and progressive approach to curriculum planning and delivery, in spite of the guidance offered by the National Curriculum. Consequently, the primary PE curriculum is often epitomised by teachers who deliver PE as "a set of discrete experiences" (Griggs, 2007: 61) rather than the more thematic approach delivered by their secondary counterparts that would suggest continuity and progression. Consequently, primary PE teachers' lack of confidence is reflected in their preference not to teach PE at all (Morgan & Bourke, 2008: 46) or teach it with little regard to how it will affect secondary PE in the future and lifelong physical fitness.

Moreover, there is a tendency for primary PE teachers to hand the responsibility to an ever-widening community of externals which has seen the growing trend of employing sports coaches (Blair & Capel, 2008; Carney & Winkler, 2008). As a result PE is often not being taught to the desired and prescribed quality as outlined in the National Curriculum (Sloan, 2010), and this approach is threatening the 'engulfment' of PE by traditional sport methods (Griggs, 2015).

Combined with the different challenges regarding the specific content and pedagogical knowledge, including the increased physical risk and class management, PE is therefore perceived as one of the most challenging subjects in the curriculum for primary teachers to deliver (Katene & Edmondson, 2004), and teachers are ‘crying’ out for further support.

Therefore, to ensure that young children are provided with the appropriate knowledge, skill and understanding through rewarding and challenging experiences within PE that support the transition to secondary PE, there continues to be an ongoing debate for the support of specialist teachers of PE within the primary school (Blair & Capel, 2008). To ensure young children have appropriate experiences of PE, Pickup and Price (2007) have suggested that a well-constructed primary school PE curriculum should, on average, provide around 500 hours of physical education learning between 5 and 11 years of age (assuming two lessons per week each term for six years). Nevertheless, an integral part of this will be ensuring that those who are responsible for implementing and developing the PE curriculum are willing to ask: ‘what do we want children to be able to do and know at the end of the 500 hours of learning’ (Pickup & Price, 2007). Furthermore, to ensure that this time is dedicated to PE, we will need to ensure full support from the head teacher and that a PE specialist is employed to fulfil these objectives and outcomes.

Furthermore, a lack of clarity and misconception surrounding the aims, values and purposes of primary PE is a significant factor (Penney & Evans, 2008) that often contributes to encourage teachers to construct a curriculum that they are comfortable with, reflecting their own personal learning experiences. Often teachers will make assumptions about this content, usually informed by their own experiences at school, which are sport based and negative (Keay & Spence, 2012) often as a result of the flexibility afforded within the programmes of study in the National Curriculum for PE. Therefore, primary PE teachers have pre-conceived ideas of how PE should be taught based on these recollections and continue to teach what and how they were taught, reinforcing what they value and believe (Penney & Evans, 1997). Therefore, this can reflect teachers delivering to their strengths and what they know due to their lack of knowledge and confidence to fully engage with the National Curriculum for PE.

### **Primary PE – nothing more than playing games or sport!**

As a result of primary PE teachers’ prior experiences, primary school PE often becomes a multi-activity approach involving short blocks of often-unrelated physical activities with the result that learning experiences are compartmentalised and fragmented (Haydn-Davies et al., 2007). Critically this has resulted in a curriculum taught in discrete blocks often presented as a disconnected and differentiated experience (Jess, 2012), often demonstrating a lack of continuity and progression. In relation to this, Talbot (2009) recently commented that a systemic weakness exists in the delivery of PE in primary schools within the UK, with the curriculum delivered being a watered-down secondary school version with too much emphasis on the activity and not on the learning experience. Indeed, Morgan and Hansen (2007) contend that inadequate training and low levels of teacher PE expertise inhibit effective PE teaching; the result is often PE lessons that “resemble supervised play” (DeCorby, Hala, Dixon, Wintrup & Janzen, 2005). In a previous study young children have commented that they too often considered PE as ‘a break from school work’ or chance to ‘get out of school work’ (Dismore & Bailey, 2011: 506). Therefore, not only primary teachers, but also pupils often interpret PE as a non-academic subject or a subject of little priority, and consequently this could reflect the importance, significance and marginal position attached to it within the curriculum (Pickup & Price, 2007).

Consequently, PE in primary schools may have languished for too long as the timetable slot where pupils can ‘let off steam’, ‘not be judged’ and therefore often could be viewed by both

those in the primary and secondary sector as not providing a meaningful and distinctive educational contribution (Sprake & Palmer, 2012). Indeed, Talbot (1996) has previously suggested that secondary PE teachers adopt an ignorant approach to primary pupils' previous achievements and highlighted that secondary teachers did not know enough about the principles of progression and therefore chose to ignore any information that was supplied to them, often being suspicious of its authenticity and relevance. Significantly, Howarth and Head (1985) have reported previously that pupils post-transfer perceived PE to be far more enjoyable. Their preference for this was due to the PE specialism offered in the secondary school and recognition that primary PE had been taught by inexperienced staff. Critically, children's perceptions of PE in the secondary school is that it "takes on the identity of a specialised subject taught by specialist teachers in specialist settings". The bulk of what is known as physical education as an institution occurs in, or is significantly influenced by, secondary physical education (Green, 2008). Indeed, Haydn-Davies (2012) suggested that if this is an accepted position, then it is not that primary PE is of low status or that it is misunderstood, but that it has no status or inherent purpose other than to meet the needs of secondary PE.

It would seem that primary PE teachers are crying out for support and attention from their secondary PE counterparts. They feel isolated, ignored and inferior, and often this contributes to their identity as a PE teacher and what they interpret as PE and culminates in primary PE being delivered as 'stop-start' curriculum of discrete experiences and a PE curriculum that is sport oriented rather than developmental and progressive.

### **A consistent and seamless approach to progression**

It would seem that we expect far too little of our children in primary PE (Pickup & Price, 2007), and furthermore, secondary PE teachers are quite dismissive in their recognition of the importance in preparing children for their secondary PE experience. As a consequence, many primary pupils often approach PE in the secondary school with apprehension, not sure what to expect or whether they are competent to participate. Indeed, Kirk (2004) argues that specialist experiences in secondary schools come too late to affect the majority of children in relation to their competencies, perceptions and motivations, and this inherently may have an effect on children's participation levels. In acknowledgement of these concerns, a young person's physical education experience typically is governed by a 'top-down' approach whereby PE does not properly begin until the secondary school.

Moreover, the introduction of a revised National Curriculum in the UK (NC, 2013) has focused attention on embedding a progressive curriculum for PE that provides continuity, consistency and relevance. In doing so, the intention has been to ensure that a seamless, joined up curriculum that has provided opportunity for young children to move effortlessly through primary to secondary school from 3 to 18 years of age has been implemented. Indeed, the Key Stage 3 curriculum provides opportunities for young children to build on and embed the physical development acquired during Key Stages 1 and 2. Subsequently, such a curriculum has intended to enhance young people's predispositions towards lifelong participation in sport and physical activity and their subsequent motivation and engagement in secondary PE. However, Griggs and Ward (2012) have highlighted that often teaching in the secondary school represents a "cycle of reproduction of curriculum and practice within PE", or what has alternatively been referred to as a spiral curriculum (Capel et al., 2003). Moreover, this would suggest that pupils repeat work covered in the primary school, and often this fails to challenge or extend pupils, to the extent that their experiences of PE are uninspiring. It would suggest that secondary PE teachers are apprehensive and distrusting of what and how PE is delivered within the primary school. Indeed,

Lance (1994: 46) identified “a need to tackle the mistrust and disrespect which exists across the divide between people who, after all, are members of the same profession”. It would seem that secondary PE teachers need to recognise that learning is central to what they do and therefore adopting a ‘fresh start’ approach is not what a seamless, joined up and progressive curriculum would suggest.

The problem of continuity during transition is not new, and Talbot (1996) suggested that primary PE teachers do not have the necessary information or background to effectively develop a progressive curriculum. Although this may be true, primary PE teachers must not be held to task, as many struggle to meet the curriculum requirements struggle with inappropriate facilities and support (Rainer et al., 2012) and have low levels of expertise and confidence (Morgan & Bourke, 2008). Furthermore, core subject areas provide clear guidelines for progression of the curriculum, monitor consistency of delivery and provide detailed transition modules that are planned and supported equally by both the primary and secondary school and integrated within the year 6 curriculum. Consequently, the position of PE within an already ‘crowded curriculum’ often results in transition being dealt with rather tentatively and considered more of a token gesture and often does not facilitate a progressive curriculum. Certainly factors such as curriculum continuity and familiarity have been regarded as barriers rather than catalysts to enjoyment of PE by children and implicated as contributing to negative attitudes towards PE (Subramaniam & Silverman, 2002). Furthermore, Dismore and Bailey (2008) have reported that pupils entering secondary school PE struggled with a change in the way that the curriculum was taught.

Therefore primary PE teachers require considerable negotiation, lobbying and strong leadership – in particular to gain access to funding for equipment, facilities, teaching spaces, guidance and support and curriculum positioning. Recently Rainer et al. (2012) identified that primary PE teachers receive little support from their head teachers and increasingly are looking to their feeder secondary school for further guidance and support on curriculum mapping, schemes of work and ultimately recognition that they are doing a good job. Moreover, there is still need to forge a stronger primary-secondary curriculum bridge so that primary teachers might gain a clearer conception of the purpose of physical education (Jefferson–Buchanan, 2011).

Indeed, Lawrence (2006) would suggest that PE lessons in the secondary school were less difficult for pupils and involved repetition of previous work covered. Therefore, it is essential that if secondary PE is to further promote lifelong physical fitness, then the enjoyment and attitudes developed with primary PE needs to be further reinforced, developed and challenged, rather than a curriculum that could be less challenging, repetitive and uninspiring. Furthermore, Rainer and Copley (2013) identified that secondary PE teachers simply ‘abandon’ what has been taught previously within the primary school and will teach what they believe to be correct. This would suggest that the curriculum for PE is not progressive and seamless, but often a ‘stop-start’ curriculum lacking continuity, consistency and collaboration between both primary and secondary PE teachers. Moreover, there are indications that discontinuities are present (Nicholls & Gardner, 1999) and a ‘hiatus in progression’ (Galton et al., 1999) contributing to pupils disengagement in physical education and school sport.

It is also worth noting that the move to secondary education presents a change in the learning and teaching environment and a sharp contrast to how young children have been taught previously. Often the child-centred approach indicative of primary education (Meirink, Meijer, Verloop & Bergen, 2008) is replaced with secondary PE teaching that is more direct and the curriculum delivered at a faster pace to facilitate maximum coverage of the curriculum (Galton et al., 2003). Notwithstanding, this clearly demonstrates an ignorance from both parties to ensure that young children are provided with appropriate learning and teaching environments within PE that ensure learning is both progressive and builds on prior experiences.



## Conclusion

Young children's early experiences of PE, sport and physical activity can have "profound implications" on future patterns of subsequent participation (Trimble, Buraimo, Godfrey & Minten, 2010: 40). Therefore, creating and harnessing pupils' enthusiasm to engage in lifelong physical activity may depend in part on the manner in which PE is delivered (Fairclough, Stratton & Baldwin, 2002) and furthermore the relations that exist between secondary and primary PE teachers to support this. PE programmes in the primary school should facilitate the learning needs of students and provide them with the skills and knowledge to successfully participate in and negotiate the world in which they live (Petrie, 2009). Indeed,

if policy makers and those within the physical education profession are serious about effecting a real change, they must redirect their efforts and build upon the key principles which they already know, namely that primary physical education is of primary importance.

(Griggs, 2007: 66)

To achieve this will require a collaborative approach, with concerned parties working in tandem to ensure that primary PE reflects a curriculum that is consistent, continuous, developmentally progressive and challenging and extending. Indeed, it must be acknowledged that the primary PE teacher cannot do this in isolation and needs considerable support, direction and guidance from their secondary counterparts if transition within PE is going to become an integral part of a young child's lifelong physical activity.

For professionals and practitioners to be able to work collectively towards overcoming the challenges within primary PE, they will first need to recognise and understand what they are working towards (Haydn-Davies, 2012). There is still clearly a need to forge a stronger primary-secondary curriculum bridge so that the primary teachers might gain a clearer conception of the purpose of physical education, which could empower them to do what they do best: teach the children in their care (Carney & Bailey, 2005). To fully implement a primary curriculum that is developmental, progressive and inspiring to young children will require teachers who are willing to engage fully with the PE curriculum and also be aware of the curriculum beyond KS2. Many researchers believe primary PE to be 'broken' and in need of being 'fixed' (Griggs, 2007; Tsangaridou, 2014), and currently this chapter would suggest that considerable work is required. It would seem there are many challenges and barriers that culminate in the transition of young children from primary to secondary school being an experience that does not challenge and does not prepare or support lifelong physical fitness, and PE is therefore still in need of significant remedial work.

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