A Philosophy on

TEACHING GYMNASTICS

in Primary Schools

Nikki Linsdell [afPE Member]

INTRODUCTION
Since leaving my role as a secondary head of physical education (PE) 13 years ago, I have been an educational gymnastics consultant. As a result of continuing to work frequently with teachers in this role, I am very aware of the extent to which teaching and learning have moved on in recent years. I am also reminded daily, however, that the widespread trepidation with which primary teachers often approach curriculum gymnastics has not changed at all. Chris Pearce summed it up in the autumn 2015 edition of Physical Education Matters article about ‘Total Swimming’ in quoting Beth Tweddle to have said, “Gymnastics tends to carry the stigma that it is too dangerous or too technical for teachers to deliver in schools.” I am passionate about turning this preconception on its head and, therefore, aim to give as many teachers as possible the knowledge and subsequent confidence to deliver high quality curriculum gymnastics. With that in mind, this article presents an opportunity for me to share what I believe to be an accessible approach to teaching gymnastics at Key Stages 1 and 2.

AT WHAT AGE CAN PUPILS LEARN A FORWARD ROLL?
The issue teachers most commonly raise as a barrier to delivering gymnastics is their lack of subject knowledge, particularly in relation to skills and apparatus safety. To focus on skills, I am frequently asked questions such as, “At what age can pupils learn a forward roll?” or “Can I even teach headstands? I thought they had been banned?” Notice how both these queries make specific reference to what I refer to as ‘recognised’ floor skills, i.e. the skills that immediately spring to most people’s minds when they visualise gymnastics. It really isn’t surprising, though, that many have an aversion to teaching gymnastics when you consider the current lack of consistency in the provision of initial teacher training and education (ITTÉ) to ensure newly qualified teachers (NQTs) have been routinely prepared to safely deliver the ‘recognised’ gymnastics skills which also include backward rolls, handstands and cartwheels. On the basis it is unrealistic to think that ITTÉ is about to become more uniform, or that all teachers will have the means to fill this knowledge gap with skill-specific professional learning, the only sensible solution is to examine the teaching of curriculum gymnastics from a different view point: the view that the provision of high quality gymnastics in primary schools is not dependent on the delivery or achievement of any ‘recognised’ gymnastics skills.

I appreciate that this philosophy is potentially controversial and have debated the topic with many PE colleagues. One ridiculed the idea by likening it to teaching hockey without teaching the ‘push pass’. Of course I can see the point, but surely it is better that teachers establish the foundations for the ‘recognised’ skills whilst exploring a vast range of alternative movement vocabulary with pupils than to make a lack of specific skill-based knowledge a reason to avoid teaching gymnastics at all. With that in mind, listening to Baroness Sue Campbell at a recent PE conference inspired me to put pen to paper and share my philosophy more widely. Within that speech, importance was placed on not confusing the skills occurring in PE lessons with high quality learning and how our subject is about so much more than teaching skills and developing physical literacy. Baroness Sue Campbell’s definition of high quality centered upon the inclusion and engagement of all pupils, backed up with the point that skill-based teaching leads to some pupils succeeding and others failing in an environment where we need all pupils to succeed.

THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM
To support the notion that there is more to curriculum gymnastics than the ‘recognised’ skills, the National Curriculum Programmes of Study do not reference the need for pupils to acquire any specific skills. At Key Stage 1, pupils are expected to “master basic movements”. Clearly, this phrase is open to wide interpretation and many may consider a skill such as the forward roll to be basic. On the contrary, I would argue that, in the context of a primary school gymnastics lesson, the forward roll should be deemed a very complex skill. Consider that the entirely skill-based British Gymnastics Core Proficiency Award Scheme (formerly BAGA awards) aimed at 5-11 year olds does not require gymnasts attending an extra-curricular setting to perform any ‘recognised’ floor skill in its entirety until the fifth of eight progressive badges. The prior learning introduced in the first four badges demonstrates just a hint of the more basic agilities that teachers can use as a starting point to introduce pupils to basic movements – basic movements that will also fulfill the Key Stage 1 Programme of Study requirement to develop “balance, agility and co-ordination”.

At Key Stage 2, teachers can interpret the requirement to “develop flexibility, strength, technique, control and balance” through gymnastics activities as an opportunity to improve aspects of pupils’ general fitness and wellbeing rather than teach specific ‘recognised’ skills. To cite another of Beth Tweddle’s views expressed within Chris Pearce’s article, “Gymnastics...can help develop many of the core skills that are transferable to different sports as well as skills that are critical to everyday life.” Certainly one of the most valued parent feedback comments I received as a recreational gymnastics club manager noted the positive impact that introductory gymnastics had had on her children’s performance in all of their physical pursuits.

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To touch on Key Stage 3, where gymnastics has been taught effectively in primary schools pupils can begin to “develop technique and improve performance” by applying and extending their range of basic movement vocabulary in the context of named British Gymnastics disciplines such as acrobatics gymnastics, rhythmic gymnastics, FreeG, Gym Challenge, cheerleading, trampoline gymnastics etc. Whilst in their purest form some of these disciplines necessitate the inclusion of increasingly complex ‘recognised’ gymnastics skills, there is always scope for teachers to adapt the discipline-specific criteria to ensure the confident participation of all pupils.

A MODEL FOR PROGRESSION IN CURRICULUM GYMNASTICS

So, if neither high quality teaching nor the National Curriculum necessitates the delivery of the ‘recognised’ skills, what does outstanding curriculum gymnastics entail? The following table presents a gymnastics-specific model for progression in the curriculum.

The most important aspect to highlight is that, despite the points made so far, skill development is a key feature of curriculum gymnastics. The wonderful feeling that can be accessed when accomplishing a new gymnastics skill is undeniable and every pupil should have the chance to experience that feeling. Those delivering curriculum gymnastics, however, must appreciate that the majority of pupils can access that feeling through, for example, successfully holding the simplest of one-foot balances for the very first time. Equally, activities can be set up for the more physically able to encounter that same feeling without a focus on the ‘recognised’ skills. For instance, the “Y” balance, straddle lever, single knee balance and side lift are all examples of more challenging balances that can be safely attempted without the additional knowledge or teaching input needed to safely incorporate headstands and handstands. Very few primary age pupils, however, will be accessing skills at this challenging level and the Principles of Progression model example of how you can develop a v-sit (essentially balancing on your bottom) from a part basic action to a whole complex action is there to help define a realistic expectation of skill level for the majority of pupils across Key Stages 1 and 2.

Whilst skill development of the nature described above is undoubtedly a key feature of curriculum gymnastics, the remaining Principles of Progression development spectrums begin to demonstrate the wealth of other learning opportunities that further lessen the significance that teachers pursuing high quality need to place on the teaching of ‘recognised’ skills. Starting with the sequencing spectrum, pupils should initially be encouraged to copy, recall and create short movement phrases combining two to three actions until they gain the confidence, fitness, knowledge and ability to remember, perform and create longer sequences of movement. Beyond this, however, pupils should also be taught to plan and perform increasingly complex compositions. At Key Stage 1, this might mean incorporating changes of speed, level and direction then, as working with others becomes more prolific at Key Stage 2, developing sequences using compositional devices such as unison, canon, matching, mirroring, meeting, parting, partner relationships, copying, complementing and contrasting etc. In this way, to continue using our Principles of Progression model example, the isolated v-sit might become a mirroring v-sit with one bent leg and one straight leg performed in unison face-to-face with a partner before they part in canon using complementary rolling actions.

In terms of adapting gymnastics actions to involve apparatus, the progression moves from floor work through to involving low/small apparatus to also involving high/large apparatus. Notice that the development relates to the size and nature of apparatus rather than the accomplishment of increasingly complex skills on prescribed pieces of equipment. Too often apparatus is seen as a way of making the performance of gymnastics actions harder whereas, in reality, the introduction of apparatus has the potential to increase the range and level of skills accessible to all pupils. For example, the pupil who struggles to perform a good quality v-sit without hand support on the floor might suddenly find success if they lean against an alternative point of contact such as a soft box top. At the other end of the spectrum, a physically able pupil wanting to progress the v-sit to a highly complex Russian lever might rest their feet on a wall-bar ladder rung so as to distribute their weight when lifting their bottom off the floor. As such, apparatus-based activities should focus on exploration of the various ways in which pupils can use a range of increasingly large/high apparatus to perform and extend their own individual repertoire of gymnastics actions. Further to having the potential to increase every pupil’s skill range, this approach to apparatus work also allows teachers to credit progress shown in relation to creative thinking and originality.

Finally, with regards to groupings, pupils should progress through working alone, to with a partner, to working in a trio and then larger groups. Less obviously, working with others can also be progressed through non-contact work to making basic contact to sharing weight to part weight and, ultimately, full weight-taking. Frequently, I see evidence of pupils being asked to take others’ weight as a starting point to partner or group work – a starting point they are unlikely to be physically prepared for, resulting in mixed levels of success. Rather than this being a criticism, however, it is simply a further observation of where a lack of subject knowledge leads teachers to rely on a different set of ‘recognised’ skills. Again, there is massive scope for exploration and creation of alternative pair/group work movement vocabulary. Teachers would be realistic to set an expectation of Year 6 pupils demonstrating success at performing skills requiring no more than shared weight-

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**Principles of Progression in Gymnastics**

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<td><strong>GROUPINGS</strong></td>
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Nikki Lindsell
taking and then, where pupils have been prepared effectively, Key Stage 3 can see the exploration of part and full weight-taking balances. Considering there is much more to high quality curriculum gymnastics than physical ability and developing skills in different contexts, however, teachers should also place value on developing social attributes such as trust, confidence, leadership and communication through pair and group work activities.

It is also important to note that, where teaching is of high quality, ‘performance quality’ will be a focal point throughout gymnastics activities. For the reason that effective technique, composition, involvement of apparatus and pair/group work cannot be reflected through weak performance, I have always encouraged pupils to prioritise quality over complexity when it comes to selecting gymnastics actions to perform. Herein lies an opportunity to also use gymnastics activities to develop every pupil’s ability to analyse, improve and appropriately select. Perhaps surprisingly, this comes as most of a challenge to the more physically able because their natural desire is to show off their full range of complex skills regardless of whether they are all performance-ready. Why not, therefore, set up learning activities that broaden their thinking beyond performing difficult skills in gymnastics? Encourage mastery of the subject by developing pupils’ ability to identify and explain the reasons why some skills are more performance-ready than others and, ultimately, challenge them to recognise which aspects of fitness need improving to perfect the performance of those complex skills that aren’t quite ready. By balancing the importance of skill complexity with performance quality in lessons, the more physically able can begin to be credited just as much for the accurate assessment of which skills to omit from a performance as for the quality and complexity of the skills they include, whilst the least physically able have alternative means by which to succeed in gymnastics.

To summarise the Principles of Progression model, the end of Key Stage 2 target is for pupils to be planning and performing compositionally developed group sequences consisting of ‘complex’ skills demonstrating creativity/originality in the involvement of high/large apparatus. Realistically, however, the majority of pupils will find one or two of the development spectrums easier to progress through than others, so this will not be a suitable goal for all. Accordingly, I pose a question: to be considered ‘more able’ in gymnastics does a pupil have to demonstrate stage 4 on the skills spectrum? If a pupil can effectively contribute to the construction of, and perform with quality, a compositionally developed group sequence involving creative use of various apparatus then they are most definitely functioning at a high level regardless of the fact that their part might only involve basic actions. The Principles of Progression model, therefore, demonstrates that a focus on the ‘recognised’ skills is not imperative to success in curriculum gymnastics. On the contrary, where priority is placed on the teaching of the ‘recognised’ skills, the capacity for pupils of all abilities to attain through and benefit from gymnastics will be immediately restricted because the plethora of other learning and success opportunities presented through and underpinning the Principles of Progression model are likely to be minimised.

TEACHERS VERSUS COACHES
So, who are the best people to deliver this model of curriculum gymnastics? Many may not realise it but, quite simply, teachers are the best qualified to make the most of the education opportunities in curriculum gymnastics. The coach qualification syllabi are significantly based on a skills matrix, meaning the majority of coaches focus their delivery on a predetermined order of skill development. Whilst this style has its place in gymnastics club settings, I do not believe it translates well into the classroom. For example, returning to the Principles of Progression model, a coach may explore pair work with pupils but it will likely be to teach specific pair balances and, similarly, any apparatus work will likely encourage pupils to use the various pieces of equipment in particular ways. Where coaches are delivering curriculum lessons alone, therefore, pupils are not as likely to have access to the broader, more creative learning opportunities that culminate in varied, differentiated and widely successful responses to unit of work core tasks. Furthermore, it is improbable that external
coaches will have the knowledge to spot opportunities for cross-curricular links. For example, would they know and be able to incorporate promotion of the whole school values or termly topic or would they have knowledge of the maths or science curriculum enabling them to recognise situations in which it would be relevant to reinforce or introduce concepts through gymnastics activities such as shapes, patterns, symmetry, momentum, rotation and points of balance?

Despite these benefits, I appreciate that many teachers don’t necessarily feel like the best person for the job because they lack confidence in their own ability as a gymnast. Surely, however, teachers shouldn’t feel pressured to be specialists of every subject they deliver, and learning in curriculum gymnastics can absolutely be facilitated regardless of a teacher’s own skill-base. In fact, having worked with and observed many coaches and teachers over the years, I have come to the conclusion that those with the least personal experience of gymnastics are often the best at inspiring success at a recreational and curriculum level because they are the most likely to be empathetic and patient with new learners. Moreover, there are alternative means by which to ‘model’ gymnastics. I encourage teachers to embrace the pupil who always wants to demonstrate but to also make use of resources such as the British Gymnastics Core Proficiency Resource Pack, which includes a DVD and posters showing exemplar theme-based movement material.

**PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

The one area in which it might be beneficial for coaches to support teachers in the planning and delivery of curriculum gymnastics is by offering enhanced skill-based subject knowledge. On the basis, however, that coaches working in schools must hold a minimum Level 2 qualification, the skill range they typically coach would not be relevant to the vast majority of pupils or the classroom situation. As such, as an alternative to collaborating with coaches, I would encourage teachers to seek professional learning in gymnastics to upskill their own subject knowledge. To have the most impact on practice, teachers should prioritise professional learning that introduces a range of very basic movement vocabulary plus ideas on how to structure that effectively into differentiated lesson activities, units and schemes of work. Considering the extent of learning opportunities that lie within applying the Principles of Progression model to just a single skill, like the v-sit, think of all the progressive lesson material that teachers can generate with an understanding of a range of different types of basic gymnastics actions. To provide an example, recently I had the chance to work with staff from a junior school over two twilight professional learning sessions. As suggested above, the purpose of the first session was to introduce teachers to different types of basic gymnastics actions including shapes, travel actions, positions of stillness, balances, jumps and rotational actions. These were explored and progressed through application of the Principles of Progression model and the session was structured to also present an effective lesson format. The aim of the follow-up session was to upskill teachers on the safe handling, layout and use of apparatus.

I based the practical activities on the content of the Cambridgeshire Scheme of Work for PE Gymnastics Year 5 Partner Work and Year 6 Group Work units so the teachers could grasp an appropriate level of expectation for pupils at the end of Key Stage 2. Not a single forward roll, backward roll, headstand, handstand, cartwheel, part or whole weight-taking balance was mentioned, required or performed during either of those sessions. Despite this, I knew I had succeeded in boosting staff confidence to deliver curriculum gymnastics when one of the teachers later told me that the training had left him and the other Year 5 teacher fighting over who would get to deliver the next gymnastics unit!

Where professional learning of this nature is not easily accessible, I would again direct teachers towards the British Gymnastics Core Proficiency Resource Pack because it contains 40 work cards detailing basic theme-related and progressive movement vocabulary including teaching points, preparation activities and ideas to challenge the more physically able. Moreover, I encourage teachers to remember that children are very creative: given considered preparation activities and ideas to challenge and effective methods of structuring learning to do gymnastics, with school and/or community-based extra-curricular opportunities signposted for those to whom a focus on complex skill development is relevant.

As I do not wish to be misunderstood, I would like to end by encouraging teachers to seek skill-specific professional learning if the opportunity arises once they have upskilled their knowledge of a more basic gymnastics movement vocabulary and effective methods of structuring and progressing learning in curriculum gymnastics. Please note, however, that high quality training in this area will not encourage teachers to set up learning activities that expect all pupils in a class to learn any ‘recognised’ skill simultaneously. Instead, teachers should be given the knowledge and ability to identify pupil readiness and willingness to learn forward and backward rolls, headstands, handstands and cartwheels and how to discretely integrate the safe teaching of those skills into relevant lessons as a means to further extend the more physically able pupils’ pool of movement vocabulary. Where such training is not possible or available, I urge teachers to appreciate that they do have the ability to deliver high quality gymnastics and to understand that a lack of ‘recognised’ skill-based knowledge is not a barrier preventing them from delivering outstanding curriculum gymnastics. By approaching it from the viewpoint that skill acquisition forms a very small part of the learning opportunities, and appreciating the infinite range of skills that exist beyond the ‘recognised’, the benefits and positive experiences that curriculum gymnastics has to offer become considerably more accessible to teachers and pupils alike.

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