‘It’s been a bit of a rocky start’: attitudes toward physical education following transition

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\textbf{Background:} Previous research has identified a number of factors that appear to influence attitudes toward physical education, but little research has focused upon the transition between Key Stages (KS) 2 and 3, when many children transfer from primary to secondary schools. Nevertheless, there are clues that this transition can be a significant event in children’s school careers.

\textbf{Aims:} The aim of this paper is to present data related to the attitudes of children and young people toward physical education, and specifically to their transition from KS2 (7–11 year olds) to KS3 (11–14 year olds). The research was informed by the critical realist stance that seeks to show causal explanations in a social world where structures and processes are constantly changing.

\textbf{Method:} Participants were selected from schools in one borough in the south-east of England that represented a range of school types: two from a boys’ grammar school, two attending a girls’ grammar school, three from a large comprehensive school and three from a middle school. Individuals were also selected according to gender (five boys and five girls) and data collected on their feelings towards and beliefs about physical education. Data were collected using individual interviews with 10 children after they had been tracked from KS2 to KS3. The first interviews were carried out immediately following the transition to Year 7 and were repeated at the end of Year 7. Drawing upon the methodological theory of Layder, segments of data were categorised with an awareness of established theoretical concepts and ideas using ‘provisional’ code labels before classifying the data using more formal categories.

\textbf{Results:} The findings showed that many of these children expressed positive attitudes toward physical education. On the whole, their attitudes remained consistent across the transition from KS2 to KS3 and there were few differences between the attitudes of those attending primary/secondary schools and middle schools. However, certain patterns emerged in relation to how other structures and processes influenced children. Attitudes toward physical education were generally described in terms of their regard for fun and enjoyment, social relations and the physical education facilities. For example, many of the children discussed progressing from having fun in physical education to experiencing a more serious skills-based curriculum. For some, the social changes that took place after moving to secondary school were compounded by an increase in social stereotyping and concerns about bullying.

\textbf{Conclusion:} The study illustrates the complexities of children’s attitudes following the transition to KS3 and the extent to which structures and practices at different levels of social reality interrelate. It also highlights the barriers and catalysts for pupils’ engagement in physical education. Two issues, in particular, are discussed: first, the
Introduction

The reported tendency of declining positive attitudes toward physical education as children progress through their secondary schooling, which is most pronounced in girls, is not news to physical educationalists (Bailey, Wellard, and Dismore 2005; Subramaniam and Silverman 2007; Silverman 2005; Lawrence 2006). This has largely been understood as cause for concern in light of the many claims of benefits made on behalf of the subject (Bailey et al. 2009). Moreover, as the main societal institution for the promotion of physical activity among children (Cale and Harris 2006), physical education is seen as a potentially valuable resource in combating sedentary lifestyles by facilitating the development of movement skills and engagement with lifelong physical activity (Bailey and Dismore 2005). Consequently, there is some concern that a decline in positive attitudes toward physical education may influence future participation in physical activities (Shephard and Trudeau 2000).

While the National Curriculum in England operates across all schools, children can transfer from school to school at different ages. The majority of children access a two-phase school model, by attending a primary school until the age of 10 or 11 years old and then transferring to a secondary school until the end of their formal schooling between 16 and 18 years old. This means that children attending a primary school transfer to a secondary school at the same time as they progress to Key Stage (KS) 3. However, some children are schooled within a three-phase model by attending a first school (around 8 or 9 years), then a middle school (12 or 13 years), before attending a high school. To illustrate this, the school models are displayed in Table 1.

Generally there are three main areas in which transition can result in potential problems: student anxiety about transfer and the extent to which this persists; adjustment to the new school and implications for achievement, motivation and commitment to school; and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. School models.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–6</td>
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<tr>
<td>6–7</td>
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<td>14–15</td>
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<td>15–16</td>
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<tr>
<td>16–17</td>
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<td>17–18</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: The three-phase model features the 9–13 middle school; R, reception.
continuity or discontinuity in the curriculum and the implications of gaps or repetition in the curriculum for student learning (Hargreaves, Earl, and Ryan 1996). Earlier studies found that children’s common pre-transition anxieties were directed towards school size (getting lost), the complexity of organisation, older pupils (bullying) and schoolwork (Measor and Woods 1984), and that these anxieties were commonly accentuated by school myths or stories told to pupils about school (Pugsley, Coffey, and Delamont 1996; Delamont 1991). Some of the causes of anxiety are related to general transition, with myths reported in the mid-1990s being similar to those collected in the late-1980s, including tales of flushing heads down lavatories, dealing with violent gangs, enduring long cross-country runs, dissecting live animals and meeting fierce or weird teachers (Pugsley, Coffey, and Delamont 1996). Such factors have been thought to instigate a period of psychological instability, thus potentially affecting the young person’s academic development (Shachar, Suss, and Sharon 2002).

There is, however, an alternative view, arguing that a certain degree of discontinuity is needed to mark children’s ‘status passage’ (Galton 2000). Or it may be that pupils require not a wholly continuous process, nor a sharp break, ‘but a bit of each’ (Measor and Woods 1984, 171). Another claim has been that, ‘discontinuity marks a new and important stage in their school careers’ and that a balance is needed of continuities and discontinuities (Galton, Gray, and Ruddock 2003, 113). Some argue that, for most children, anxiety is not only an inevitable consequence of the transition, but central to the development of effective coping strategies (Lucey and Reay 2000). The anxiety found in some children’s narratives has been coupled with some excitement and recognition of the maturity that transition to secondary school symbolises (Ruddock, Day, and Wallace 1997). One suggestion made by Galton, Gray, and Ruddock (2003) was to focus strategies that sustain the excitement of learning (and the subsequent commitment generated) beyond the initial stages of transfer.

Some of the changes experienced by children as they progress to KS3 may be associated with two main aspects of the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE). First are the activity areas that are expected to be taught in physical education at the time of this study. Table 2 shows the number of areas that the pupils in our study should have experienced at each Key Stage, and it was at KS2 that children would normally have experienced the widest range of activities. By KS3, children should have experienced four activity areas.

As part of the NCPE, and in addition to the activity areas, four aspects of knowledge, skills and understanding were also established as a focus for teaching and learning. At the time of this research, these ‘core strands’ were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Stage</th>
<th>Areas of activity</th>
<th>Minimum number of areas to be taught</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dance, games, gymnastics</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Dance, games, gymnastics, plus two others chosen from swimming and water safety, athletics, and OAA</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Games and three chosen from dance, gymnastics, swimming and water safety, athletics and OAA (one must be dance or gymnastics)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Two activities chosen from dance, games, gymnastics, swimming and water safety, athletics and OAA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: OAA, outdoor and adventurous activities.
• Acquiring and developing skills
• Selecting and applying skills, tactics and compositional ideas
• Improving and evaluating performance
• Knowledge and understanding of fitness and health (Department for Education and Employment/Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (DfEE/QCA) 1999, 6).

It is possible that these strands could also influence children’s responses to questions concerning their attitudes toward physical education.

The problem of curriculum continuity during transition was highlighted by Talbot (1996), who suggested that teachers may not have the necessary information or background to develop effectively a progressive curriculum from primary to secondary school. Indeed, research on school transition revealed that information is not exchanged consistently between secondary and primary schools (Capel, Zwozdiak-Myers, and Lawrence 2004). Although information was usually exchanged in written form or through discussion at formal meetings, it was often generic and at a group level rather than about individual children (Capel, Zwozdiak-Myers, and Lawrence 2004). Zwozdiak-Myers (2002), however, identified a number of ways in which knowledge can be exchanged, curriculum continuity planned and children prepared for transition. For example, arranging visits to secondary schools and organising sports festivals may help to improve continuity and communication between primary and secondary schools. Associated benefits are recognised to include a smooth transition for children and better communication between teachers, maximising learning potential and increasing levels of motivation and interest, as well as making children feel more at ease and confident (Zwozdiak-Myers 2002).

A number of factors have been shown to influence children’s attitudes specifically toward physical education, including the curriculum, teacher, perceived competence and motivation and gender (Subramaniam and Silverman 2002). One factor frequently mentioned but rarely examined is the transition from KS2 to KS3, when most children move from primary to secondary school. Described as the most influential period in a child’s education (Shachar, Suss, and Sharon 2002), there is a broad consensus that this transition can influence attitudes about school (Anderson et al. 2000).

Few studies have focused upon physical education as a context for studying children’s attitudes during the transition from KS2 to KS3, despite Pugsley, Coffey, and Delamont (1996, 138) noting that many stories collected were ‘concerned with the relationship between the body and the school’. Furthermore, earlier research has focused upon anxieties and expectations of children before the transition (Delamont 1991; Woodruff and Curtner-Smith 2007). Only one study explored children’s attitudes toward physical education during the transition from KS2 to KS3 in England. This dissertation (Lawrence 2006) measured attitudes toward physical education as well as attainment, self-esteem and self-motivation over a 20-month period using observation techniques, teacher assessment, questionnaires and interviews. Overall, the study found that attitudes toward physical education declined as the research participants progressed to KS3. Indeed, the results showed a decrease between the end of Year 6 and the beginning of Year 8 in the percentage of pupils who looked forward to physical education, participated in extra-curricular activities and would choose to participate in physical education. However, there was a slight increase in certain aspects of attitudes among the total sample at the beginning of Year 7, before declining at the beginning of Year 8. These findings were linked to the fact that pupils also indicated that lessons were not necessarily as hard as they thought they might be, and that there was some replication of work they had previously covered.
Aims of the research

Earlier work has identified a decline in children’s positive attitudes toward physical education as they get older (Silverman and Subramaniam 1999; Silverman 2005; Lawrence 2006). However, little research has tracked and reported upon children’s attitudes toward physical education as they progress to KS3, when most children have moved to a new secondary school. The term *attitude* was chosen because it represented beliefs about as well as feelings towards an attitude object. Although the word attitude is used in everyday language, it has been defined in various ways across different fields of study. For the purpose of this study, a two-component definition was adopted, described as an individual’s beliefs and feelings about an attitude object (Subramaniam and Silverman 2002).

The study of attitudes has a long and complex history, but perhaps the most influential model of the attitude structure is the triadic model developed by Allport (1935). Allport viewed an attitude as a ‘hidden mechanism’ which directs behaviour (Thomas 1971, 10). In other words, if a child likes physical education (affect), he/she might tend to think positively about it (cognition) and behave accordingly in the lesson (behaviour). Although this model was popular in the 1960s (Rosenberg and Hovland 1960; Krech, Crutchfield, and Ballachy 1962), questions arose about the validity and viability of this model if the three components are not closely linked (Thomas 1971). In particular, the empirical research conducted upon the relation between attitudes and behaviour has revealed that attitudes and overt behaviour are not related in a simple fashion and at best have only found average correlations (LaPiere 1934). In relation to physical education, any assessment of behaviour would first have to be based upon whether pupils avoided participating in the lesson, and secondly, if they did attend the lesson, how they behaved. The situation was made more complicated by having a variety of activities towards which children could have behaved differently.

The major criticisms of the triadic model of attitude with regards to behaviour led us to the adoption of a two component definition, defined as, ‘an individual’s beliefs and feelings about an attitude object’ (Subramaniam and Silverman 2002, 75). This approach takes into account that attitudes may change in different situations and that they can be temporary as well as enduring. It also allows for those beliefs that are held as a consequence of adopting a particular type of attitude. For example, if a child is a football fan, she/he may incidentally have a highly rehearsed positive attitude towards football-based activities in physical education.

This research was shaped by the theoretical view that society exists independently of our conceptions of it, yet it is dependent on our actions (Davies 1999). This stance, termed ‘realism’, is one that has been influenced by the writings of Roy Bhaskar and Rom Harré but has various other labels, such as ‘critical realism’ and ‘transcendental realism’. Realists seek to explore the structures and human practices operating within the social world, in order to convey as full a picture of a diverse external reality as possible (Sayer 2000). In order to identify causal connections, we need to understand outcome patterns rather than seek outcome regularities. Outcome patterns are themselves shaped by mechanisms, or the ‘powers’ inherent in a system (such as physical education teachers or policymakers) and are also dependent upon context (such as the conditions of the lesson) (Pawson 2006). In other words, the attitudes of children and young people towards physical education are an outcome shaped by various mechanisms and contexts.

The critical realist stance taken here seeks to explore the structures and human practices operating within the social world, in order to convey as full a picture of a diverse external reality as possible (Sayer 2000). The research questions were formed in such a way as to
allow exploration of the possible factors exerting influence on the children’s attitudes toward physical education. Importantly, they enabled children to respond in relation to personal as well as structural influences.

- What are children’s attitudes toward physical education and school sport?
- What influences these attitudes?
- In what ways does the transition from KS2 to KS3 influence these attitudes?
- Does the school type influence children’s attitudes toward physical education?

Methods

This paper reports some of the findings of a larger research project (Dismore 2007) which incorporated a multi-method research design, obtaining data using two large-scale questionnaires, focus-group interviews and individual interviews over a three-year period (see Table 3 for sample sizes). Reflecting the critical realist stance, this mixed method approach offered ways to address misleading findings by cross examining data (Gorard and Taylor 2004). The location of the study was one borough in the south-east of England in which both two-stage and three-stage schooling systems operated. Middle schools were an important element of the school sample as they enabled research to be conducted with children who were not moving to secondary school during their transition to KS3. The first phase of the study consisted of a questionnaire study administered to all Year 6 children attending three middle and nine primary schools. A sub-sample of children was then invited to participate in a number of focus-group interviews. The second phase of the study consisted of a questionnaire study administered to all children Year 7 attending two middle and five secondary schools, followed by individual interviews with a sub-sample of 10 children. These 10 children were selected according to a range of criteria: the type of secondary school they were attending (three from a large middle school, two from a girls’ grammar school, two from a boys’ grammar school and three from a large mixed comprehensive); the types of attitudes they had expressed via the questionnaire and focus groups carried out as part of the project; and to represent an equal number of girls and boys. While the small sub-sample meant that it was not possible to make generalisations from the data, the substantial research into the impact of gender upon physical education experiences suggested that gender should be one criterion for selection. This paper reports the findings obtained during the individual interviews with 10 children following the transition to KS3.

Informed by the data collected from the questionnaire study as well as focus-group discussions, the individual interviews focused upon the concepts and issues previously raised.

Table 3. Data sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data sources</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Data used for this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key Stage 2</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>Not used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Stage 2</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>Not used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus-group interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Stage 3</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>Not used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Stage 3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>All 10 used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
while still being open to further lines of enquiry. The individual interview also enabled the children to talk freely and directly to the researcher, without interruption from other peers. The interviews were conducted in settings within the school, such as offices and halls and lasted for around 40 minutes. While it is possible that the settings influenced responses, the individuals were more familiar with the research and the researcher after participating in focus groups and in the questionnaire study. Two interviews were also conducted with each individual over a year, which enabled further cross examination of the interview data obtained in different settings. Also, during the second round of interviews, when the weather was more favourable, the researcher was able to utilise outside spaces where the children appeared to relax and respond more openly to the interview. Overall, the extent to which individuals were familiar with the researcher and the research process and carrying out two interviews over the year, was important for establishing trustworthiness of the data.

To help ensure some consistency, while at the same time encouraging the children to open new lines of investigation, the interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview schedule. The interview schedule was designed to focus the research through the elements of Layder’s (1993) research map, to draw upon any aspects of their own self, situated activity, setting and context and how these interacted. In this model, the ‘self’ focuses how an individual is affected by and responds to social interaction, ‘situated activity’ is the dynamics of the social interaction, the ‘setting’ provides the immediate arena for social activities, such as the school and the ‘context’ refers to large-scale and society-wide concerns, such as the physical education curriculum. In practice, it can be difficult to separate the levels, such as ‘setting’ from ‘context’ when some social forms straddle the two (Layder 1993). Bearing in mind these complexities, the framework was used to obtain data relating to:

- children’s personal views about physical education and school sport in their school;
- an explanation of their attitudes toward physical education and school sport;
- any changes in attitudes toward physical education during transition;
- suggested reasons for any changes in attitudes.

The interview schedule was first piloted with one child at the middle school and analysis was carried out by the researcher and a co-researcher to establish consistency.

Consent

Particular emphasis was placed on the notions of informed consent and assent and this is reflected in the processes by which assent and consent were initiated and sought (Jago and Bailey 2001). Assent from the children was sought to tape record the interviews, although interview notes and a research diary were kept to support these data. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity to protect the participants’ right to privacy were addressed at all stages of the research. The data reported in this paper use pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Analysis

The intention of the data analysis was not to make generalisations but to highlight and explore the emerging themes and patterns. For this research the quandary of the inter-relationship between the text and ‘one’s placement in the text’ was addressed, using Layder’s (1998) adaptive theory (see Chapter 3). This recognises the use and acceptance
of an intermediary ground where the influence of empirical data and rational thought co-exist and in this sense, the research was both inductive and deductive.

In practical terms, this meant characterising segments of data with an awareness of established theoretical concepts and ideas using ‘provisional’ code labels before classifying the data using more formal categories. The coding process required persistent checking for overlaps and inconsistencies until each segment was assigned to a category and an important aspect of this process was to remain open to the discovery of new themes and categories as the process continued (Smith and Osborn 2003). The themes presented here, namely the curriculum, social relations and facilities were the three core categories to which all of the provisional codes linked. An example of provisional coding is provided in Figure 1.

As Figure 1 shows, many different themes and categories related to wider policy contexts as well as issues of different elements of the social reality such as their setting and situated activities. Where possible, the categories identified from the questionnaire and the reflexive accounts were compared and contrasted with the findings of the interviews. It was hoped that involving all these sources in the analysis process would draw together information pertaining to the context, setting, situated activity and the individual selves, providing a fuller picture of the complex and multi-faceted social reality (Layder 1993) as well as helping to establish trustworthiness of the data. During the early stages of analysis a co-researcher carried out the coding of a transcript to check the consistency of identifying and assigning codes to the segments of data.

Participants

The 10 individuals interviewed at KS3 had been tracked as they progressed through their final year at KS2 (Year 6) and into KS3 (Year 7). The selection of 10 individuals was made partly to ensure a manageable workload, but was also based upon a number of selection stages. Firstly, only those children that had added their personal details to the questionnaire were included in the sub-sample. A second stage was to arrange this sub-sample according to the way they had expressed their attitudes toward physical education in the questionnaire (see Table 4). Thirdly, the sub-sample was divided into those attending different types of school. Lastly, the responses were divided according to boys and girls. The final selection was made to represent these groups only and was in this sense ‘random’, involving no personal bias. The data presented in Table 4 report some of the responses from the questionnaires completed by the 10 individuals that helped to select the respondents. Reflecting the results of the whole study, more children expressed positive feelings towards physical education and only a small number expressed negative feelings, which tended to correspond to the beliefs about their perceived competence.

Figure 1. Example of provisional coding used for interview data.
Following the questionnaire administered at KS3, individual interviews were carried out at the beginning of the year, as soon after the transition as possible. However, during this first set of interviews, it became apparent that some of the children were still settling in to their new school and the decision was made to repeat the interview process the following summer. This enabled the children to gain additional experience of their school and physical education lessons, resulting in richer accounts of their attitudes toward physical education following the transition to KS3.

Findings

The interview data reported here indicated that most children’s attitudes toward physical education either remained the same or improved following the transition to KS3, whether the children moved within or between schools. The findings also showed that the children tended to explain their attitudes by drawing upon specific elements of the physical education environment, spanning and connecting the layers of social reality as described by Layder (1993). However, the responses to their social relations (situated activity) were perhaps the most revealing. To a critical realist, some of the children’s attitudes appeared to be continually constructing and reconstructing the dynamics of social interaction among their peers and further embedding the social practice in to the school culture.

Curriculum

In most cases, the children who had moved to a new secondary school noticed a change in the curriculum and a difference in the way that the curriculum was taught. However, not all children responded to these changes in the same way. For two children who had previously expressed negative feelings towards physical education, the subject was perceived to be more challenging. For example, Annie noticed that, ‘it is probably more difficult because there is more stuff to learn’. Similarly, Robert commented on the warm-up phase of the lesson, which he claimed was, ‘always the hard bit’. When asked to describe the warm-up activity, he responded:

...sometimes, um, at the moment you have to walk around to one quarter, then do side step for one quarter, one side and then turn around and do it the other way, so do that and then sprint to the middle. That was one half of the football pitch and I’m normally at the back.

Table 4. Individual interview sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Feeling KS2</th>
<th>Feeling KS3</th>
<th>Perceived competence KS2</th>
<th>Perceived competence KS3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>M3</td>
<td>Love it</td>
<td>Love it</td>
<td>Not so good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>M3</td>
<td>Love it</td>
<td>Like it</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>M3</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>S6</td>
<td>Love it</td>
<td>Love it</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>S6</td>
<td>Don’t like it</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Don’t like it</td>
<td>Like it</td>
<td>Not so good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Like it</td>
<td>Not so good</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Like it</td>
<td>Like it</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>Like it</td>
<td>Like it</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>Hate it</td>
<td>Hate it</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: To ensure the anonymity of the participants, all names are pseudonyms.
These findings concur with those of Subramaniam and Silverman (2002), who reported that factors such as the curriculum can be regarded as barriers rather than catalysts to enjoyment by children who have already developed negative attitudes toward physical education. In this way, it shows the variation in responses of the self to the same changes to setting and its respective situated activities.

In contrast, those who had expressed positive feelings towards physical education reported that the curriculum had improved after transition. One reported improvement was the increased breadth of activities to which children were exposed. As David explained: ‘I actually like it more than my old school because you get to do more stuff in PE here’. In this way, the explanations link feelings of the self to the school setting. This response also supports other research showing that positive attitudes toward physical education are associated with a curriculum made up of a variety of activities (Luke and Sinclair 1991; Carlson 1995; Subramaniam and Silverman 2002). In the case of David, the greater variety of activities in physical education was a factor that contributed to his increased enjoyment in the subject. Having also moved to a secondary school, Gina had noticed a difference in the curriculum and specifically, a departure from fun and games to more skills-based learning. Gina described the change in more detail by saying:

Now we get a lot more skills taught to us, whereas in our old school, it was like fun and games – doing what you want with the ball and everything, whereas now if you are in netball or something, you have to be constant with your footwork and everything and it is really important because of your grades and everything.

This example illustrates the way in which some children appeared to demonstrate a more sophisticated approach to learning associated with skills, consistency and achievement, rather than valuing the subject for providing ‘fun and games’. It may be, too, that some children were internalising teachers’ expectations. Certainly, teachers can play an important part in emphasising the differences between primary and secondary schools in an effort to encourage children to think of themselves (and behave) in a more age-appropriate way (Galton and Willcocks 1983).

Interestingly, Andy seemed frustrated at the idea of playing games. He said that: ‘games are fun, except they are not really helping you with your health and everything, but sport is’. Andy was starting to equate real physical education with ‘sport’ and, interestingly, associated sport with health. It is possible that this association of physical education with health stemmed from explicit discussions in lessons of the NCPE strand concerning ‘knowledge and understanding of fitness and health’, as well as the well-known and frequently discussed political discourses of health and obesity (Kirk 2006). In this sense, the response may show that children can be affected by and respond to wider contextual mechanisms as described by Layder (1993), beyond the more immediate structures such as the curriculum. The rejection of ‘fun’ in favour of more ‘serious’ objectives also appears to be another example of a child experiencing the transition to KS3 as the ‘status passage’ referred to by Galton (2000).

Progress was also alluded to by Louise, who was attending the middle school. On being asked how physical education had changed in her middle school during the KS2–KS3 transition, she replied that: ‘The ability of the sports has changed, because we go in to every sport in a bit more detail which I like. But other than that it hasn’t really changed apart from being a bit harder’. When asked what she meant by ‘harder’, she continued: ‘well all the stuff about muscles and the exercises and learning about my ability in sports, like what I can do and what I can’t do and what I need to improve on’. In this sense, the
middle school children reported minor changes to the curriculum since they had progressed to KS3, although they were being taught by the same teachers. For example, Andy said that: ‘... PE is quite hard in Year 7 and so is Year 6, so it hasn’t really changed much’. However, there was an expectation that physical education would change in the near future. Andy expected the general school experience to change as he progressed through the Key Stages, especially as he reached the point of transfer to high school. He commented that, ‘as you go up the years in middle school and you go near to College, your third school, it gets more serious because you have to pay attention more’. This suggests that some of the middle school children were looking forward to the transfer to a new school, identifying it as marking a watershed, after which they believed physical education became ‘serious’.

On a theoretical level, this signals that some children were pre-empting a change in the structures and processes, anticipating that this would directly impact upon their own selves. At a practical level, this finding is also similar to that of Lucey and Reay (2000), who found that pupils often showed a mixture of enthusiasm and anxiety for starting a new school.

**Social relations**

Earlier research discovered a loss of status as the children went from being at the ‘top’ year in one school to the ‘bottom’ year of the next school (Measor and Woods 1984). In support of this finding, one of the major changes for children moving to a secondary school was being the eldest in the school to then becoming the youngest. Frequent comments were made in relation to being in the youngest year group. As Gina explained:

> Well, in my primary school, like, when you get to Year 6 you were like top of the school, everyone was below you. Whereas now you are the lowest of the school and it is like a big change to become the highest to the lowest.

Indeed, those with negative feelings towards physical education worried more about making friends than those who expressed positive feelings towards the subject. For example, when asked what had concerned her most about secondary school, Annie replied: ‘Yeah, my best friend went to [another school] so I didn’t really know anybody properly’. Later Annie was asked what she thought was the best thing about her new school and answered: ‘I know more people now’. Robert had also found it hard socially, because: ‘other people are older than me, because normally I would be the oldest’. When asked whether he had moved schools with his friends, Robert answered: ‘It’s been a bit of a rocky start at the moment, but I know a few people but I don’t know anybody else’. It is possible that this change took place when children were already searching for and constructing their identity as part of adolescence, which can make the process particularly difficult for some children (Pellegrini and Long 2002). Indeed, for Robert, working collaboratively in physical education could be a problem. When asked why he preferred working on his own, he answered: ‘Because, if I can’t really disagree with myself and I can’t argue with myself as well’. This suggests that Robert associated working with others with anxiety and confrontation, and that he did not feel that he belonged with the ‘community of learners’, which is thought to negatively affect attitudes to school (Osterman 2000).

There was a sense in which the physical education environment was a distinctive setting for peer socialisation. Hargreaves and Galton (2002) have commented upon the different teaching approaches in primary and secondary schools, particularly the
way that pupils were often under surveillance by the teacher and positioned in rows in secondary school lessons. Physical education was seen by these students as different, and this may help explain David’s comment that: ‘it’s the chance you actually get to chat because you don’t get to chat in normal lessons’. Perhaps it is because physical education did provide greater or distinctive opportunities to socialise that lessons were also settings in which wider social issues came to the fore. At one school, there was a particular focus upon ‘boffs’ among the children interviewed. In a study by Swain (2002), ‘boff’ was a main term of abuse in school and usually applied to anyone who worked hard and did not reject the official school culture of conformity and academic achievement. Paula, who liked physical education generally and loved to dance both in and out of school, described cockney dancing as an activity that only ‘boffs’ enjoyed:

Pupil: I didn’t wanna do cockney dancing and they made you do it.
Interviewer: Did anyone else like it?
Pupil: No, everyone hated it, apart from the boffs.
Interviewer: Apart from?
Pupil: The boffs, they liked it.
Interviewer: Why do you think they liked it?
Pupil: I don’t know really. Sad people!

This example highlights the way that social relations in physical education could be influenced by social stereotyping (Leyens and Schadron 1994). The so-called ‘boff’ sub-culture was primary identified in terms of physical appearance. Paula went on to describe a ‘boff’ as somebody who did their top button up and showed five stripes on her tie. They were talked about in a disparaging way by Paula and Matt, who similarly described ‘boffs’ as: ‘... just weird, five stripes, shirt tucked in, buttons up, um, teacher’s pet’. Physical education had become one way in which the pupils started to divide peers into ‘boffs’ and friends, based on the preferred physical activities of the two groups. Arguably, in identifying and interacting in this way, this group of children were actually helping to further embed this sub-culture into the school system.

This reflects, of course, the substantial literature on the ways in which certain forms of physical activity, especially traditional, organised, competitive sports, create contexts in which some are more ‘able’, suited, or permitted to take part than others (Evans 2004; Penney and Evans 1997). Wellard (2002), for example, describes this phenomenon in terms of an ‘exclusive masculinity’ which draws upon traditional orthodox understandings of heterosexual masculinity. In this study, such exclusion was witnessed through gender, physical ability, school behaviour and sub-cultural alliance. And the distinctive social setting of physical education seems to have, at least, articulated them. Further, this emphasises the extent to which the layers of social reality interrelate and in particular, the influence of the situated activity on the self. For some children, this could be potentially harmful and for others, may help them to integrate. However, it also shows how social practices developed within a school setting can be promoted, enforced and embedded through physical education so that it can feed back in to the wider school system.

**Facilities**

The findings also highlighted the importance of facilities and equipment in attitudes to physical education. There is a surprising lack of evidence related to the effects of improved
facilities on attitudes toward and engagement with physical activities in childhood (Dismore, Wellard, and Bailey 2007). However, in this study the move to a new school signalled a significant change in the seriousness with which physical education was taken by the pupils. A number of comparisons were made between equipment and facilities at secondary school and in primary schools. For example, according to Simon: ‘our hockey sticks in our old school were plastic and the ball wasn’t hard’. Other children similarly highlighted an increase in access to more suitable equipment. For example, Matt explained that: ‘it is better. We get better things to use. Normally in (my old school) the balls would all be flat and you get them pumped up here’. As Gina explained, the change in equipment meant that they had a better chance of being able to carry out tasks properly, thereby emphasising the links between the setting and self within their social reality:

Gina: In (my old school) you had like plastic racquets and everything and like plastic balls, whereas you have like real tennis racquets and real shuttlecocks and real tennis balls.

Interviewer: Does that make a difference?

Gina: Yeah because now I can hit the ball properly.

Comments were also made about the physical education space. David, for instance, commented: ‘yeah we have got more space and definitely more facilities. It’s good, well I think it is anyway’. Few comments were made with reference to changing or clothes worn for physical education. An exception to this was Simon who, when asked why he liked physical education on Friday rather than Tuesday, replied: ‘coz when you’ve got like your tracksuit bottoms and you can just change into them and then go to school with them. I just hate wearing this black stuff. It makes you all hot’. This is contrary to other research that has discussed the negative influence of having to wear certain clothes (Flintoff and Scraton 2001; Williams and Bedward 2002), and instead suggests that, at some times of the year, physical education clothes were preferable to school uniform. This may reflect a more universal desire to wear clothes designed for leisure because it has become more fashionable (Swain 2002).

Conclusions

These data illustrate the complexities of children’s attitudes following the transition to KS3. Indeed, the findings provide evidence that attitudes toward physical education (the outcome patterns) are themselves shaped by mechanisms, or the ‘powers’ inherent in a system (such as the curriculum) and may also be dependent upon additional contextual issues such as political agendas on health (Pawson 2006). However, while these factors appeared to contribute to attitudes of all children, there were subtle complexities within this pattern. This has practical as well as theoretical implications.

Most of the children attending both middle and secondary schools expressed positive attitudes toward physical education and much of the data about the curriculum drew attention to what children perceived as progression from fun and games in physical education to more skills-based learning. While this may be evidence of the consistency of the curriculum across schools, there were also differences in the way that children responded to these changes. As Subramaniam and Silverman (2002) found, certain factors could be regarded as barriers or catalysts to their enjoyment, which highlights the crucial importance of positive early experiences of physical education. Previous research has reported that teacher behaviours (Carlson 1995) and class environment (Portman 1995) can influence pupils’ attitudes toward physical education. Peer support is also an important factor, especially
during transitions when children re-negotiate their identities and friendships (Pratt and George 2004). Physical education is likely to become an especially significant context for intra- and interpersonal negotiations during such transitions, since it embodies many of the sites of such negotiation, such as gender, sexuality, physique, assertiveness and success. And so it is not surprising that stereotyping was an emerging issue for many of the participants. Overall, this study shows how different levels of reality interlink to sustain and develop particular cultures and practices. However, the findings obtained from middle schools also show how children were anticipating changes to structures and processes when they moved schools and to some degree, pre-empting the impact this would have upon their own selves.

Our findings raise two further issues for teaching physical education following transition. First, the fact that a high proportion of children at KS3 associated physical education with more serious preparation for competitions might similarly be explained with reference to the ‘performative culture’ within schools and more specifically, the extent to which the NCPE curriculum is dominated by competitive games (Penney 2004; OfSTED 2004a, 2004b). One danger of this approach is that it could lead to the development of exclusively elite groups. In fact, the limited view of children as performers is likely to direct attention to mastery of a narrow range of skills and individual performance in sport:

The curriculum, from this perspective, can be linked to notions of apprenticeship. However the apprenticeship is highly specific and, furthermore, openly positions pupils in a sporting and social hierarchy. It will always be a minority of pupils who are in the sporting elite and to whom this orientation of the curriculum is arguably appropriate or likely to be of interest. (Penney 2004, 143)

Second, these findings provide evidence that participation in physical education can act as a powerful medium for social development and the period when most children are moving schools can heighten the processes of social inclusion/exclusion (Bailey 2007). As Butler (2006, 255) argued, the traditional activities of physical education provide ‘a micro-cosm of the complex social relationships and interactions involved in working within the large social community’. A recent academic review has demonstrated that it is naïve to assume that simply initiating children in sporting activities will necessarily result in positive development (Bailey et al. 2009). On the contrary, without the mediating force of a skilled teacher who is able to present these activities within a certain form of value system, it may well be the case that physical education exaggerates, rather than challenges alienation, exclusion and disengagement from physical activities.

This stage of the study enabled the researcher to explore in greater depth the individuals’ attitudes toward physical education and as such, provided opportunity to delve more deeply into the children’s experience of physical education during transition. While they confirmed many of the findings from the focus group and questionnaire data, these interview data also showed more clearly how children’s attitudes can change over time. This suggests that further research is needed to identify the cause of decline in attitudes identified by researchers (Silverman and Subramaniam 1999; Lawrence 2006; Subramaniam and Silverman 2007). In particular, further tracking of children as they progress through the Key Stages is needed in order to ascertain the impact of additional factors such as school cultures and specialist teaching. Moreover, there is a further need for inquiry into the relationship between children’s attitudes towards physical education and levels of lifelong physical activity.

**Note**

1. Since this research was conducted, the KS3 curriculum has changed. See [http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/subjects/physical-education/keystage3/](http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/subjects/physical-education/keystage3/) (accessed March 27, 2009).
References


