

## Strengthening ‘The Foundations’ of the Primary School Curriculum

### Abstract

The low status of the foundation subjects (e.g. Music and Physical Education) in English primary schools is well documented. Using PE as an illustrative example, a thematic analysis of 51 Physical Education (PE) trainee students’ assignments, based on their perceptions of a two-week experience in a primary school, highlighted a number of areas of concern (e.g. limited/inadequate preparation; insufficient teacher knowledge/confidence; variable/limited subject leadership; and non-qualified teachers delivering the curriculum). The possibility of teachers, coaches and other external specialists learning collaboratively with and from each other within a community of practice/learning is proposed as one way of strengthening the foundation subjects within the primary school curriculum.

**Keywords:** Foundation subjects; teacher learning; CPD; Communities of Practice/Learning; Physical Education; primary education.

### Introduction

The National Curriculum for primary education (ages 4-11) in England is divided into two categories of subject: Core subjects (Maths, English and Science) and Foundation subjects (Art and Design, Citizenship, Computing, Design and Technology, Geography, History, Languages, Music and Physical Education). The foundation subjects have, arguably, suffered from a low status (relative to that ‘enjoyed’ by the core subjects), and it has been claimed that this ‘gap’ has only widened since the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in the late 1990s (Blackburn, 2001; Morgan & Hansen, 2007). Boyle and Bragg (2006, p. 570) describe the gap as a ‘*territory of priority*’ and link the testing of the core subjects with their inevitable supremacy (the foundation subjects are not tested).

This gives rise to a number of issues with regards the quality of teaching and learning in the foundation subjects. Notably, shortfalls in terms of the time allocated to the foundation

subjects within initial teacher training (ITT), as well as the funding and uptake of continuing professional development (CPD) have been identified across the foundation subjects, for example, within: Music (Beauchamp & Harvey, 2006; Beauchamp, 2010; Holden & Button, 2006; Hallam et al., 2009); Art, (Hallam, Das Gupta & Lee, 2008; Watts, 2005); Religious Education (RE) (McCreery, 2005; Ofsted, 2009); Design & Technology (Ofsted, 2000); Geography (Ofsted, 2011a); and History (Ofsted, 2011b; Nichol & Harnett, 2012). Consequently, a number of generalist primary teachers report a lack of confidence and/or subject-specific knowledge across a number of foundation subjects (see, for example, Gifford, 1993; Wragg et al., 1989; 1992; McRobbie, Ginns & Stein, 2000; Hallam, Das Gupta & Lee, 2008). Given this lack of pre- and in-service training and teachers' low levels of knowledge and confidence, it is not surprising that a number of 'cracks' within the foundation subjects have been identified. For example, within music, based on research carried out between 2003 and 2005, Ofsted (2005) highlighted that progression, assessment and accommodation (teaching space) for the subject is poor. In addition, research by Knapp (2000) highlights a lack of time for music on the school timetable, which was typically found to be between 30 and 60 minutes a week.

Research also indicates the above to be mirrored in Physical Education (PE) with similar trends being seen. For example, inadequate pre- and in-service training and primary teachers' low levels of confidence in PE have been acknowledged by a number of authors (Harris, Cale & Musson, 2011; Griggs, 2007; Ofsted 2006; Caldecott et al., 2006), with Talbot (2008, p.8) reporting the number of hours devoted to PE within a primary Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course to be 'a *national disgrace*'. Consequently, Blair and Capel (2011) argue that, whilst PE is one of the most challenging subjects in the National Curriculum for generalist teachers to deliver, many enter the profession with a '*limited background in, and preparation for, teaching PE*' (p. 486). Duncombe and Armour (2004) suggest that:

*'For the majority [of primary school teachers] ... the skills required to teach PE probably derive from a combination of distant memories of their own PE lessons, some all-too-brief hints and tips from their training, and some on-the-job learning' (p. 296).*

Just as in the other foundation subjects, this lack of teacher preparation and confidence often leads to poor curriculum coverage, with claims that some areas of the primary PE curriculum are prioritised over others (Caldecott, Warburton & Waring, 2006). An example of this is the

way in which ‘games’ are often favoured (Ofsted, 2002), whilst athletics and outdoor and adventurous activities (OAA) are rarely taught (Wright, 2001), and swimming is particularly ‘problematic’ (OfSTED, 2004; ASA, 2014). Further, some PE lessons in primary schools have been judged by Ofsted to be of poor quality, with Griggs (2007) highlighting how findings from previous/past Ofsted reviews (1999; 2005) have revealed there to be:

*‘insufficient challenge in lessons, an over-concentration on performance, the delivery of an imbalanced curriculum (dominated by games), [and] poor assessment and recording’* (p. 60).

The consequence of this is that pupils do not experience the primary PE curriculum in the broad and balanced way in which it was intended.

### **Passing on Responsibility?**

Given the difficulties outlined above regarding the adequate training of primary school teachers across all areas of the National Curriculum, low-levels of teacher confidence and the restructuring of teachers’ workloads in 2003 (entitling teachers to a statutory 10% reduction in teaching load for planning, preparation and assessment (PPA)), many primary teachers now have the opportunity to ‘opt out’ of some of their teaching by using external providers to deliver their lessons, with PE often falling ‘victim’ to this (Rainer et al., 2012). In 2005, Ward reported that external sports providers/coaches were being employed by approximately a third of primary schools to cover PE lessons; a situation which Blair & Capel (2011) argue has become increasingly popular in recent years following the introduction of the school sport coaching programme<sup>1</sup> in 2008. More recent developments still have since led to such practice becoming even more common place. For example, the government in England has recently committed £150 million per annum until 2016 for primary schools to improve the quality of physical education and sport for all pupils via the introduction of a ‘primary sports premium’ (DfE, 2014; afPE, 2014a). Schools typically receive £8000 plus £5 per pupil per annum and this funding is ring-fenced to be spent solely on physical education and school sport. The Association for Physical Education (afPE) in the United Kingdom (2014a) suggest this funding should be used for: provision of continuing professional development (CPD); cover to enable teachers to attend CPD; purchase of CPD materials; hiring specialist teachers

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<sup>1</sup> As part of the PE and Sport Strategy for Young People (PESSYP), coaching grants of £21,500 per year were paid directly to School Sport Partnerships with the aim of improving the quality and quantity of coaching offered to young people.

to work alongside generalist teachers; running sport competitions or increasing participation; buying in coaches; and developing new after school/holiday clubs.

A recent Ofsted survey (2014) on the sports premium was conducted to examine the use and impact of the premium. Based on visits to 22 schools, deemed to be performing well in PE, the research focused on good practice (in relation to the use of the primary premium) and illustrated how these extra funds have: enabled more coaches/specialists to be bought-in to many schools; and provided professional development for teachers and teaching assistants (in PE). Indeed, Ofsted reported that *'most schools employed specialist teachers or coaches to help improve the effectiveness of class teachers and teaching assistants in teaching PE'* (p. 6). Yet, despite this being identified as good practice, they warn that this was least effective when it *'consisted of simply observing specialists with no opportunities to teach or coach alongside them or improve their skills through other means'* (p. 7).

Considering previous reports of teachers' low levels of confidence and training in PE (e.g. Harris, Cale and Musson, 2011; Griggs, 2007; Ofsted 2006; Caldecott et al., 2006), it might seem at first that having an 'expert' or specialist in schools to teach the subject would be a sensible step forward. However, Griggs (2008) highlights worrying gaps in a coach's knowledge of, for example, the National Curriculum, classroom management skills and individual pupil's needs and abilities. Whilst Ofsted (2006) question whether non-teachers can deliver continuity across the curriculum as well as within PE, and warn that the use of coaches to deliver PE may be undermining high quality PE provision in some schools. Indeed, Blair & Capel's (2011) research reinforces some of these issues, finding that, at the start of a CPD programme designed to improve coaches' pedagogical skills, many did not have an adequate understanding of short- and medium-term planning, pedagogical approaches or knowledge of the curriculum to enable them to cover specified work in PPA time, and many had virtually no knowledge of the National Curriculum. Bearing in mind that some coaches are employed by commercial organisations, another issue to consider might be the extent to which all coaches are concerned with high quality teaching and learning or whether their motivations may lie elsewhere.

To address some of these concerns, AfPE (2014b) have recently produced guidance for schools on the employment of coaches to assist with the provision of PE and school sport.

This guidance outlines the minimum standards expected of coaches employed by schools (e.g. a minimum age of 18 years and a level 2 coaching qualification), and identifies examples of best practice (e.g. inducting coaches into schools and monitoring provision). Furthermore, Ofsted (2014) recommend that teaching by specialists and coaches be regularly monitored to ensure high standards are achieved and maintained. Indeed, in an evaluation of the School Sports Coaching Programme, Brown and colleagues (2011) revealed that over 80% of Primary Link Teachers (PLTs)<sup>2</sup> had reported: *'pupils' skill, ability, confidence, enthusiasm, enjoyment, motivation and participation in a sport context [had] ...increased or greatly increased in comparison with before the programme started'* (p. 5). In addition, 75% of Primary Link Teachers stated that the programme had: *'increased or greatly increased pupils' positive attitudes to PE lessons... in comparison with before the programme started'* (p. 5). Thus, while caution should be exerted when employing coaches to teach PE, the research by Ofsted (2014) and Brown et al. (2011) suggests that, with careful planning and monitoring, coaches do have the potential to be effective 'teachers' of PE. Interestingly, in contrast, Griggs (2008) identifies that, in some instances, primary teachers may not be any better qualified to teach PE than the coaches, thus highlighting potential problems with both coaches and teachers delivering PE lessons.

Parallels can be found in the other foundation subjects, with the use of peripatetic teachers in music being an obvious example. Indeed, Alter, Hays & O'Hara (2009) identify a number of 'consultants' who are employed by schools to deliver aspects of the National Curriculum, such as: artists, specialists, parents, classroom assistants, secretaries and librarians. In addition, Sanderson (2008) acknowledges the potential knowledge and expertise that local dancers could bring to schools and how this could be shared through communities of practice, whilst Ofsted (2008) similarly illustrate the ways in which the local community can bring their expertise into schools (e.g. artists, bakers and engineers). Thus, external 'experts' clearly have potential to enhance pupils' learning and to make a valuable contribution to various curriculum areas. Indeed, in the case of PE, specific guidance from afPE has been

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<sup>2</sup> The School Sports Partnerships were introduced as part of the Physical Education, School Sports and Clubs Links (PESSCL) strategy in 2002. As part of this Primary Link Teachers (PLTs) were appointed in primary schools and School Sport Coordinators (SSCo) in secondary schools to support the strategy, the overall aim of which was to increase the quantity and quality of PE and school sport provision for young people in UK schools. PLTs were normally qualified primary school teachers.

issued to help ensure the appropriate deployment of this expertise with fourteen National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) in the UK recently endorsing the following statement:

*‘teachers are at the heart of delivering high quality Physical Education by providing appropriate professional learning, including resources and teacher support thus creating a sustainable model; coaches deployed in schools should not be seen to replace or displace teachers’ (afPE, 2014c, p.1).*

Another timely development to note here has been the provision of extra government funds in England to train 240 additional primary teachers with a specialism in PE (120 in an initial pilot during 2013-2014 and a further 120 during 2014-2015). The intended role of these primary specialists is to *‘support other teachers in developing their skills and improving the quality of PE teaching’* (afPE, 2014a). Implicit within this aim, is an acknowledgement of the potential of learning with and from colleagues within the workplace. This notion of learning with and from others within the workplace falls within a social constructivist framework (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978; Knuth & Cunningham, 1993; Kirk & Macdonald, 1998) and has been described by Wenger (1998) as learning within a ‘Community of Practice’ and by Cocklin, Coombe & Retalick (1996) as a ‘Learning Community’. In this context and in PE, such communities might comprise teachers, pupils, learning support assistants and coaches/adults other than teachers. Indeed, numerous authors have provided their support for learning through informal professional development of this kind (Day, 1999; Rosenholtz, 1991; King & Newmann, 2001; Nicholls, 1997; Sandholtz, 2000; and Craft, 1996), and the potential of which will be returned to later in the discussion.

In recognition of the low status of the foundation subjects and the potential impact that some of the highlighted issues may have on pupils’ learning in the foundation subjects in primary schools, the situation specifically within PE, is explored here. Drawing on secondary PE trainee teachers’ experiences of the subject during a primary school placement, this paper focuses on the main issues that were identified and which may be typical within foundation subjects more broadly. It then makes some recommendations for addressing such issues which, if effectively implemented, could serve to strengthen the foundations of the primary curriculum and, arguably, have a positive impact on pupils’ learning and achievement.

## **Methods**

As part of their teacher training course, 51 trainees undertaking a Postgraduate Certificate in Education in secondary PE at a higher education institution in Central England completed an assignment focusing on a nine day primary school experience that they undertook at the start of their training. In particular, the focus was on the teaching and learning they observed in their specialist subject (PE). The trainees were aware that these assignments would be used for research purposes and were requested to ensure that the schools and all school staff remained anonymous within all supporting documentation, notes and their submitted work. Likewise, consent was obtained from the students for their assignments to be used for this purpose and they were reassured that their comments would remain confidential. The demands on both the trainees and schools were part of the standard requirements for the course which all parties had agreed to in advance. The schools in which the trainees completed their experiences covered a broad geographical spread (although the majority were located in the Midlands), with the size of the schools ranging from under 100 to over 500 pupils. The schools accommodated the following age ranges: 3-11 (8 schools); 4-11 (25 schools); 7-11 (8 schools); other or not stated (10 schools). Likewise, there was a fairly even spread of schools with high and low proportions of: pupils eligible for free school meals; pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN); and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) pupils.

The methods of data collection employed by the trainees varied but most used a combination of: field notes; lesson observations; interviews (often informal) with teachers, pupils, PE coordinators and head teachers; and document analysis (e.g. lesson plans, units of work and school policies.). Patton (2002) describes 'full' participant observation as employing *'multiple and overlapping data collection strategies: being fully engaged in experiencing the setting (participation) while at the same time observing and talking with other participants about whatever is happening'* (pp. 265-266). Given Patton's definition, it could be argued that this study involved this multi-layered approach, allowing comparisons to be made between what the trainees observed, what they were informed, and what they read in policy documentation.

Specifically, the trainees were asked to include five sections within their assignments: 1) an introduction; 2) an explanation of the school context; 3) a discussion of teaching and learning in the school; 4) a discussion of teaching and learning in PE in the school; and 5) a

conclusion. Whilst all sections were read by the researcher to establish contextual detail, sections 2 and 4 were of most interest and were subjected to more structured analysis. An inductive approach using the constant comparison method (e.g. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2000) was adopted to analyse the data and to generate codes, which were then classified into categories/themes, as described by Dey (1993). The following categories/themes emerged from the data: limited/inadequate preparation; insufficient teacher knowledge and confidence; variable/limited subject leadership; non-qualified teachers delivering the curriculum; and areas of concern. Direct quotations from the assignments were extracted and copied and pasted under these headings within a Word document which allowed connections to be made with the wider literature and an overall picture to emerge (Dey, 1993).

## **Findings**

The findings are presented in five sections according to the main themes that emerged from the data (see above) and also corresponding to the issues identified in the introduction to this paper. Within each section, a brief overview of the findings is given, followed by some illustrative quotations from the trainees' assignments.

### ***Limited/inadequate preparation***

Ten out of the 51 trainees specifically mentioned teachers' CPD in their assignments. Their comments indicated that, despite there being a National PE-CPD strategy<sup>3</sup> at the time, the teachers were unable to identify much PE-CPD that was available to them and, that when CPD opportunities were offered, they rarely made use of them. This latter point is illustrated by the following trainee's comment:

*The PE coordinator expressed that there was funding for teachers to attend courses, yet few teachers took up this offer.*

The PE-CPD opportunities that were taken up included: courses (e.g. three members of staff attending a dance course following identification of this by their school as a target for school development); learning from secondary teachers who, as a result of the Physical Education,

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<sup>3</sup> The National PE-CPD strategy was one strand of the PESSCL strategy (outlined earlier).



School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) strategy (see earlier footnote (2) regarding the School Sports Partnerships) worked with primary schools alongside general class teachers; and other external ‘experts’ providing advice and guidance (e.g. coaches). One trainee specifically referred to initial teacher training, commenting that many of the staff at his/her school had received as little as one day of PE as part of their training and suggested that this was not enough to provide primary teachers with the knowledge they needed to teach PE:

*The number of hours devoted to PE during teachers’ training has left them with little knowledge of how and what to teach.*

### ***Insufficient teacher knowledge and confidence***

Whilst it is acknowledged that the trainees were at the start of their initial teacher training for Secondary Physical Education and were not, therefore, necessarily experienced in the demands of the primary school PE curriculum, they did comment on a lack of knowledge and/or confidence in PE amongst the primary teachers they had been placed with. For example, twenty two of the 51 trainees made this observation, noting the following:

*I found that many of the class teachers lacked a significant level of confidence and experience in teaching a number of the activities... the effectiveness of PE was reduced by some teachers’ weak knowledge of the subject.*

*One member of staff due to take a hockey lesson asked a colleague whether he needed to know the rules.*

*In a netball practice, pupils paired up; one had the ball and had to move around and the other had to knock the ball out of his/her hands... that would be considered contact by the opponent and footwork by the individual with the ball!*

### ***Variable/limited subject leadership***

Not surprisingly, most PE coordinators were described as responsible for leading the subject and for guiding other teachers. In some instances, they were reported by the trainees to provide units of work/lesson plans, arrange CPD, and/or organise extracurricular clubs; these are illustrated in the quotations below:

*To provide guidance and support to any member of staff teaching physical activity.*

*To facilitate the practice of PE throughout the school and to increase confidence in teachers... responsible for planning of all PE lessons and to organise CPD.*

*Monitoring the delivery of other members of staffs' PE lessons as well as ensuring that extra-curricular clubs are staffed and run effectively.*

Whilst the PE coordinators appeared to be fulfilling their roles, the following comments reveal that not all of them were specifically qualified for the job and/or enthusiastic about the subject. Given that these teachers may have been appointed to the role with little or no choice, this finding is not necessarily surprising. That said, the comments below may help to illustrate this as a potential problem:

*It appeared his own level of practical PE experience is limited to what he received during primary teacher training, outside football coaching and personal experience with athletics, OAA and cross-country.*

*One teacher is 'lumbered' with the role of PE coordinator for the whole school... the only reason they were given the role was that they were the most organised person, having nothing to do with strengths or expertise, as this teacher specialised in English.*

*The coordinator had little qualifications related to sport or exercise.*

### ***Non-qualified teachers delivering the curriculum***

To varying degrees, most schools appeared to employ or enlist the support of adults, other than the class teacher, to deliver aspects of PE. A number of different adults were identified as being involved in the subject's delivery, including: leaders from external companies; learning support assistants; the school premises manager (a qualified coach); qualified coaches; swimming teachers; and secondary school teachers. At one extreme, qualified sports coaches taught almost all of PE but, the more common practice, was for the class teacher to take one lesson each week and an external expert to take the other, during which time the class teacher would often take their PPA time. A teacher in one school explained that it was cheaper to employ a coach than it was a supply teacher. In relation to this theme, trainees noted:

*The two hours minimum was met by all years with teachers taking one hour of physical education and a local sports college providing the other lesson, known as 'sports hour'; this allowed teachers an hour of planning, preparation and assessment time.*

*Employed outside coaching staff to deliver a selection of PE lessons. The class teacher is not required to be present and I found that the time is often used to plan other lessons.*

*Teachers took their PPA time during PE. Lessons were covered by the caretaker who held several coaching awards.*

### ***Areas of concern***

A number of further issues were identified within the assignments, some of which raised concerns relating to the delivery of aspects of PE. In particular, the following sub-themes emerged: inadequate breadth and depth of National Curriculum coverage; limited range of teaching styles; insufficient planning; and inadequate assessment. The key areas of the UK National Curriculum for PE, at the time of the research, were considered in relation to the data and most schools offered games, dance and gymnastics, but other areas and notably Outdoor and Adventurous Activities (OAA) were often found to be given limited or no coverage at all. There also seemed to be no pattern to which year group received swimming and one school did not provide it at all due to a lack of funds. Likewise, there were clear differences in the approaches adopted to deliver PE in the schools. Trainees tended to either report that the teachers structured their lessons well, encouraged independent learning, facilitated group work and adopted a range of teaching styles; or that teachers were over-reliant on direct teaching styles (e.g. command or practice style), although this was sometimes dependent on the activity that was being taught. Two illustrative quotations highlight these differences:

*The children in dance were supported and guided towards creating their own sequences in small groups rather than copying from the teacher, this created an extremely motivational learning atmosphere.*

*Lessons were often poorly organised and lacking direction, with the majority of teaching styles being very instructive and absent from demonstration.*

Likewise, issues were identified with teachers' planning and assessment. Primarily (although this was not the case in all schools), many of the trainees reported that planning and assessment in PE were ineffective, and in some cases did not happen, as the following comments illustrate:

*Many of the teachers admitted to not planning their PE lessons as thoroughly as other lessons.*

*Lack of a planned scheme of work for all staff to follow in their lessons... teachers were teaching what they wanted and when.*

*There was no form of assessment taking place... PE coordinator had to search through many folders to find the assessment sheets they were supposed to use... teachers just guessed the approximate level towards the end of term when reports were due.*

*PE is simply written about at the end of the year... based on the teacher's general feelings for the child's abilities throughout the year.*

## **Discussion**

The findings presented in this paper serve to reinforce some of the problems identified in the literature surrounding generalist teachers' confidence and knowledge in the foundation subjects generally and PE in particular. This was illustrated within some of the trainees' comments in which they highlighted a lack of knowledge and confidence in relation to primary school PE, and was an area of concern noted by Ofsted in 2012. Data from our research suggests probable reasons for gaps in teachers' knowledge and their low levels of confidence to include insufficient ITT and CPD, combined with unenthusiastic and/or unqualified PE coordinators in some schools. Thus, two recommendations with the potential to strengthen teaching and learning in PE, as well as in the other foundation subjects, are worthy of further consideration: i) employing specialists; and/or ii) providing opportunities for teachers and external experts (e.g. coaches, peripatetic music teachers, local artists and authors) to learn with and from each other. Within music, for example, Beauchamp & Harvey (2006) identify the important contribution that peripatetic teachers can make to the music curriculum. In PE, on the other hand, support for employing specialist teachers is divided, with some authors clearly in favour of specialist teachers believing they have a vital part to

play, and others less enthusiastic. For example, some authors (e.g. Blackburn, 2001; Fairclough & Stratton, 2000; Revell, 2000) argue that, in the absence of adequate teacher training, confidence and knowledge of the subject, a specialist teacher may be of benefit. Meanwhile, Caldecott, Warburton & Waring (2006) are of the view that: *'The value of primary education lies in the same teacher delivering the curriculum as a whole, making the links between different aspects of the curriculum and in knowing pupils as individuals with individual needs'* (p. 46). Likewise, Talbot (2008) claimed that the best PE lessons she saw were delivered by generalist teachers who were specialists in child development and, therefore, argues that the answer is to develop the confidence and competence of generalist teachers to teach PE. Perhaps the government's initiative to introduce primary PE specialists, whose role is to work with generalist classroom teachers to develop their practice, represents a middle ground (TES, 2014). With this in mind, the discussion now turns to consider point (ii) and the role that professional development might have to play in enhancing the subject knowledge and confidence of generalist teachers.

At the time of the research, the national PE-CPD programme was providing numerous opportunities for teachers to attend 'free' PE-CPD courses, thus, as the findings from our research show, there was some PE-CPD on offer to primary teachers at this time. However, upon examination of the research findings from the evaluation of this programme, possible explanations for the poor uptake are evident. For example, schools faced challenges securing funds to cover supply teachers to enable them to benefit from these courses (Armour & Makopoulou, 2012) and those teachers who did attend, *'reported difficulties in cascading knowledge to colleagues and in sustaining and developing their learning'* (Armour & Makopoulou, 2012, p. 336). Moreover, funding for this provision then ended and teachers once more found themselves faced with a situation where their ITT was 'insufficient' and their CPD was 'ineffective' (Harris, Cale & Musson, 2011, p.378). A final point worth reiterating here is the competition between subjects within the primary curriculum and, as was highlighted in the introduction, priority tends to be given to the core subjects of Maths, English and Science (Boyle and Bragg, 2006). Thus, an additional reason for the low uptake of the PE-CPD courses that were on offer, as identified by the trainees in this research, might be that priority was given to CPD in other curriculum areas.

Of particular relevance at this point are the findings presented here and elsewhere that suggest the apparent willingness of teachers to ‘hand over’ control of their PE lessons to sports coaches (e.g. Griggs, 2008) and other adults, as well as the assumption by some, that coaches/others will be better equipped and able to teach PE. Regardless of one’s viewpoint, it would seem that there is a substantial amount of knowledge and practice which could be shared between coaches (or other outside ‘experts’) and teachers, and arguably clear structures to enable this to happen would be beneficial to both parties, as well as to pupils’ learning. If this is accepted, and given the constraints/limitations with more traditional forms of CPD, it is useful at this point to return to the theories of learning introduced earlier and which promote informal forms of professional development/teacher learning as a vehicle for learning with and from other colleagues in the workplace.

### **Strengthening the Foundations: the role of constructivist approaches to professional learning**

Within PE, the concept of colleagues learning with and from each other has been acknowledged as helpful and effective by a number of authors. Armour and Yelling (2004), for example, noted: *‘they [teachers] value learning with and from colleagues and want more opportunities to learn in this way; and they will tolerate ‘official’ CPD simply for the chance it offers to learn informally with professional colleagues’* (p. 204). In terms of effectiveness, research by McKenzie et al. (1997) revealed that generalist classroom teachers can improve the quality of their PE lessons when they are provided with assistance and training from specialists. Likewise, Beauchamp (1997) found that teachers favour a system of collaboration with specialist teachers. However, a study by Duncombe (2005) which sought to establish communities of learning (centred on the teaching of athletics) amongst teachers in two primary schools revealed that facilitating a Community of Practice within PE in primary schools was not straightforward. In both schools, and despite the researcher’s best attempts to encourage and facilitate opportunities for collaboration, reflection and the sharing of knowledge, instances of true collaborations were rare. Instead, the teachers relied on the researcher to lead sessions, offer feedback and provide the necessary knowledge for them to deliver athletics. One explanation for this was that the teachers involved in the study did not, themselves, possess adequate knowledge of teaching athletics in order to be able to share it with colleagues. Consequently, one recommendation from this research was to enlist the

support of external experts to share their knowledge, thereby facilitating a community of practice (or learning).

Thus, as proposed earlier, adopting a social constructivist approach to learning and encompassing collaborative learning within schools may be one potential solution to alleviate some of the concerns expressed in this paper. Put simply, teachers could learn from coaches or other external ‘experts’ (by observing their lessons, reflecting on what they have seen and asking for advice on teaching specific skills) and, in turn, coaches and other experts could learn from teachers and enhance their pedagogical knowledge and skills (e.g. classroom management, knowledge of how pupils learn, behaviour management strategies, knowledge of the National Curriculum, planning, assessment). Support for this, for example, is to be found: in the afPE guidance on the use of the Primary Sports Premium (e.g. afPE 2014a); guidance on the effective employment of coaches in schools (afPE, 2014b); the NGB statement in support of coaches working alongside teachers (rather than replacing them); and from Blair and Capel (2011) who ask:

*‘Should/could teachers and coaches coexist in a professional capacity, working in unison with a common goal of providing a high quality education experience that motivates, inspires and provides access and opportunity for children to take part in physical activity?’ (p. 502).*

There has similarly been support for the effectiveness of such an approach within the School Sport Coaching evaluation report (2011), which identified:

*‘The majority of the coaches (62%) thought that the teachers and other school staff had improved in their ability to teach sport or physical activity sessions by working alongside or observing coaches’ (Brown, Mason, Cushion, Bass & Nevill, 2011, p. 6).*

Indeed, one teacher involved in this research commented:

*‘The main benefit to us as a school with many unspecialised PE teachers is the ideas the sessions produce and the demonstration of how to involve students in a positive way’ (p. 24).*

Likewise, a 2004 Ofsted report stated: “*in the best schools, teachers work closely with coaches, volunteers and other visiting teachers to ensure consistency in their approach and to make sure that learning is achieved*” (p. 10). This collaborative approach clearly has potential benefit for all primary subjects, as endorsed by Holden & Button (2006) in relation to music, in their support of the potential for music specialists to work alongside generalist teachers.

However, whilst the potential of this approach is evident and may seem obvious, such opportunities do not seem to be readily or fully utilised. For example, trainees’ comments in this research study stated that teachers often took their PPA time whilst their PE lessons were being taken by external coaches. It is unclear whether this was due to: a lack of willingness (by the primary teachers) to engage in collaborative learning: a lack of opportunity within the schools to enable collaborations between teachers and coaches to occur; or whether the teachers were even alerted to and aware of the value of such collaborations. Indeed, a limitation of this study was that the method of data collection (PE trainees’ observations in primary schools), did not allow for such in-depth exploration of the issues that arose. Further, the observations were based on unverified views and perceptions at an early stage of the trainees’ teaching careers. Future research could explore some of the ways in which primary schools currently do or could utilise external providers such as coaches, artists and musicians within a framework of collaborative professional learning and the impact of this on teaching and learning within the foundation subjects. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder’s (2001) advice concerning the ‘cultivation’ of communities of practice would be especially pertinent here (i.e. that steps need to be taken to enable, encourage and normalise collaborative learning). Within PE, it would also be interesting to explore the role of the primary PE specialists in facilitating and sustaining communities of learning within (and potentially between) schools, as would further investigation into the effectiveness of the Primary Sports Premium. The identification and promotion of examples of good practice from such research, as well as guidance and support from each of the subject associations, would be especially helpful and important in informing future professional learning and practice.



Whilst it is accepted that further research into the feasibility and effectiveness of such an approach is needed, the recommendations from this research have the potential to positively impact teachers' knowledge of as well as their confidence to teach the foundation subjects. Thus, whilst there is no guarantee of the success of the collaborative approach suggested above, encouraging teachers and other external experts to learn with and from each other may have the potential to contribute to higher quality teaching and learning in the foundation subjects in primary schools.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this research have identified and reinforced some key issues within one of the foundation subjects (PE) and have confirmed the tendency for individuals other than teachers to deliver PE in primary schools. Social constructivist learning theory (encompassing informal forms of professional development, Communities of Practice and Communities of Learning) has been proposed as a possible means of improving primary teachers' knowledge and confidence in PE and in the foundation subjects more broadly. In addition, a number of considerations, drawing on social constructivist learning theory, have been identified in order to maximise the potential of these forms of teacher learning in primary schools. Thus, it is suggested that external experts (be it in sport, music or other foundation subjects), as specialists with knowledge in specific areas, should be encouraged to work with, learn from, and share their knowledge with generalist teachers (as specialists in pupil's learning and development) and vice versa. As was highlighted above, facilitating this may not be easy, but with joint working and commitment, and with the best interests of pupils and pupils' learning at the core, capitalising on groups' mutual strengths seems logical and potentially beneficial for all.

Finally, it is suggested that further research is required in order to highlight the potential of such an approach to schools and teachers. Recommendations, therefore, are that ways in which communities of practice/learning could effectively be facilitated in primary schools between generalist teachers and subject specialists/external providers warrant further investigation, and that teachers are alerted to the benefits of such an approach to their own professional development as well as ultimately to pupils' learning. In conclusion, it is

suggested that, if implemented, these recommendations would go some way to strengthening the foundations of the primary school curriculum.

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