

Broadening the physical education curriculum – Using Parkour within gymnastics

The introduction of the revised curriculum and the greater flexibility that this now offers, means that gymnastics could hold an important position in the development of a creative and vibrant physical education curriculum. Gymnastics, as a metaphorical umbrella, shelters a collection of activities that provides the teacher with a wealth of choice and numerous teaching possibilities. Artistic, Rhythmic, Compositional / Educational, Sports Acrobatics, Cheerleading, Trampolining, Team Gymnastics, Aerobics, Freestyle Gymnastics, Parkour or Free Running, can all be categorized under the title of gymnastics and can provide the prospect for a variety of different and new activities to be taught within schools. This vast assortment can provide learning opportunities for every child, allowing for a range of teaching styles to be adopted and an array of learning styles to be catered for. Furthermore, this multiplicity allows for breadth and balance, and the personalization of the curriculum, a common theme imbedded within the revised physical education curriculum.

For this particular article, the focus shall be on Parkour.

The growth of Parkour

The sudden growth in activities associated within the discipline known as Parkour, has not failed to grasp the imagination and curiosity of today's youth. It has been introduced to through a variety of different media forms, ranging from the dramatic chase scene at the start of a James Bond movie, to documentaries exploring seamlessly impossible pathways over numerous architectural landmarks, to the million plus hits on you tube. But there is still much confusion over the differences between the various forms and the legalities about whether Parkour can be taught in schools or not.

Parkour CAN be taught in schools

There is now agreed and shared opinion that Parkour is an acceptable activity to be taught in schools. The misconceptions that it cannot be not taught schools are just no longer accurate. It has its own national governing body (Parkour UK) which clearly highlights the numerous coaching pathways and qualifications available. AfPE has its own comprehensive guidance towards the teaching of Parkour in schools and is easily accessible on Parkour's UK website. There are also a number of books available to guide instructors of Parkour in developing the correct teaching techniques and practices. Trainee teachers at a number of institutes are being trained in the delivery of Parkour ready for them to take this into schools (for example, every trainee teacher, both undergraduate and post graduate, at the University of Brighton has received compulsory trainings into the safe delivery and instruction of Parkour in school).

A case for the inclusion of Parkour related activities

The very nature of overcoming obstacles and exploring a variety of possible actions and pathways links Parkour implicitly with 'Identifying and solving problems to overcome challenges of an adventurous nature'. Furthermore, embedded within the philosophy of Parkour is the removal of competition and the right to find one's own way. Even though there are recognized basic movements within the discipline, creative improvisation and expression is encouraged. These fewer predefined movements, compared to the often rigid formality of gymnastics, can counteract the fear of failure, a notion that numerous pupils feel when unable to complete complex gymnastic skills. The idea of no set rules or correct technique means that children simply cannot fail. The notion of efficiency also has dramatic implications concerning health and safety. Central to Parkour's philosophies is the avoidance of injuries and minimizing of risks. If the drop is too big, the gap is too wide or the ledge is too narrow, the right course of action is to find another way. Sharing and respecting the space, recognition of creativity and aesthetic qualities through critical evaluation are some of the admirable qualities that Parkour can offer.

There are movements within British gymnastics to respond to the discipline with the introduction of 'Freestyle' gymnastics, which offers many similarities to Parkour and accredited qualifications in Parkour or urban gymnastics are now fully available. Positioning Parkour within an educational context would now seem an obvious direction to take and failing to embrace its numerous qualities and characteristics, when so many of today's youth are already practicing the discipline, could potentially be missing a valuable learning opportunity whilst failing to address the numerous safety issues and questions that still surround the activity of Parkour. Education and schools, would seem to be the natural home for these issues to be solved.

Parkour, sport and competition

In 2007 there was considerably efforts to preserve parkour's philosophy against sport competition. Competition within Parkour can push people to contest against others for the satisfaction of a crowd and/or friends or important others. Performing stunts or tricks, somersaults and other skills where the head drops towards the floor, do not fit within what is traditionally seen as Parkour. Many that are rooted in the history of Parkour believe it is unique in its philosophical underpinning and cannot be a competitive sport unless it ignores its altruistic core values of self-development. If parkour became a 'true' sport, it will be hard to seriously teach and spread parkour as a non-competitive activity, therefore an activity, past time, leisure pursuit even art form are often better ways to categories Parkour. Questions such as 'who is the best at parkour' are often asked, but these should be avoided within class discussions. Instead focus should be given to individual progress or pathways utilising discussions around original ideas and movements or innovative use of space and equipment.

Some of these discussions may sit at polar opposites to the current Governments focus on completion within physical education, however, to use Parkour within a class comparative competitive environment, would be using the activity far from its original purpose and defeating the object of some of its very core principles and defining characteristics.

So where now?

It is not suggested that Parkour related activities replace gymnastics based activities, in fact, quite the opposite. Parkour and gymnastics share many common themes, and with the introduction of the revised curriculum with its continued absence of specific activity areas, a synthesis of approaches may lead to a more personalised and vibrant curriculum.

What follows are examples on how to introduce Parkour related ideas and movements.

Possible movements

While there is no official list of "moves" in parkour, the style in which practitioners move often sets them apart from others and there are a number of movements considered fundamental. Some examples of common movements are:

- 1 Vaulting over obstacles
- 2 Jumping and landing accurately with the feet on small or narrow obstacles
- 3 Jumping and landing feet-first on a vertical surface, catching the horizontal top with the hands
- 4 Using a rolling motion to help absorb impacts from larger drops
- 5 Running towards a high wall and then jumping and pushing off the wall with a foot to reach the top of the wall
- 6 Moving from a position hanging from a wall-top or ledge, to standing on the top or over to the other side

- 7 Tic tac – using a wall to help overcome an obstacle

Equipment to use

- 1 Benches – for precision jumps and balance walks (use normally or upside down for differentiated balance)
- 2 Box tops – For vaulting, tic tac movements, gap jumps
- 3 Swedish beams – for vaulting, traveling around, though, over and under
- 4 Mats – but be wary of using crash mats as this can encourage pupils to jump from too high and jump from too far away. Without the crash mat pupils will make better, safer choices.

Half term block of work

- 1 Start with an introduction to Parkour. Explain what it is about; highlighting the key aims of the activity and the key safety principles. Simply play some video footage of any Parkour or free running, and the pupil's imagination will start to run.
- 2 Safe landing. A key focus must be placed on correct landing and exiting via rolling, continuing the motion forward. Try not to encourage too much 'drop' and 'stop'. This places pressures on the joints. Introduce jumping from varying heights and jumping across varying distances, with correct landing and correct continuation of movement and momentum. Link two jumps together, then three, until a small sequence of varying jumps and landings has been created.
- 3 Precision jumping can also be explored, jumping from one specific place to another, usually taking off and landing on smaller surface areas.
- 4 Balance – Explore balancing across a number of objects of varying surface areas. E.g Walking along benches, upturned benches, beams, Swedish beams at varying heights. Explore how pupils travel when balancing; on two feet, on all fours, alternating feet.
- 5 Vaults – Place obstacles around a gym and encourage pupils to find different methods to overcome them. Key words to explore - on, off, over, through, around, under. Differentiation is very straight forward. Higher or lower boxes, benches set up normally or upside down, beams high or low, gaps between equipment can be reduced or increased. Maybe let the pupils decide to encourage autonomy of learning.
- 6 Indoor circuit – Create varying indoor circuits for pupils to try their newly learnt skills. Pupils can run individually or in pairs, having their own space or sharing it with others.
- 7 Possible outdoor Parkour session, using the schools grounds or the local community. (It is essential to discuss any outdoor Parkour related activities with the school and the local LEA for their guidelines on such activities and to follow AfPE'S guidance on teaching Parkour outdoors)

Final thoughts

Young children are participating in Parkour, whether we, as the established gatekeepers of suitable activities, like it or not. Go into any town center, coastal sea front, and urban landscape and there will be young people practicing skills or movements that they believe to be Parkour. The concern here lies in the fact that the vast majority of these will have picked up movements and skills off the internet or through social media websites. This means that they will not have been taught the true meaning behind parkour, and some of the important philosophical standpoints that are integral to its existence. They will not have received tuition from an experienced or qualified coach or teacher, so it is safe to assume that their technique might not be accurate or correct. As a physical educator, I cannot sit by and watch such events transpire without feeling the need to address it to the best of my ability. Every trainee teacher at Brighton University now gets delivery on the safe delivery of Parkour in schools, so perhaps it is these future PE teachers that can be the ones to bring Parkour safely and effectively into the schools physical education curriculum, where it can only bring innovation, creativity and enrichment to the curriculum.