

Continuous Provision in Physical Education for SEND Pupils: A Transformative Approach

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Introduction:

Continuous Provision (CP) has predominantly been used in early years' education. The use of CP in physical education (PE) also has significant potential particularly for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). I first came across the concept when introduced in the context of SEND settings by Gail Woodcock (2018), who explored the implementation of approach, which moves away from traditional whole-class teaching in favour of adult-led mini sessions and child-directed activities. This has proven effective in enhancing pupil participation and engagement.

As the Director of Sport at Durham Trinity School since September 2022, I faced the challenge of adapting PE teaching methods to meet the needs of pupils with complex learning profiles, including pupils' neurodiverse conditions. Coming from a mainstream PE background, I quickly recognised that traditional PE structures – such as warm-ups, skill development, games, and plenaries – did not cater to the individual learning styles of many students at Durham Trinity.

The question emerged: Could integrating continuous provision into PE lessons foster a more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environment for SEND pupils? This report details the journey of integrating continuous provision into PE at Durham Trinity, with a focus on enhancing engagement, addressing sensory needs, and supporting individualised learning goals.

Rationale for Adapting PE Teaching Approaches

At Durham Trinity, our pupils displayed significant variations in cognitive ability, attention span, and engagement with traditional PE tasks. Some students exhibited behaviours such as running around the sports hall, which distracted from the lesson, while others struggled to stay engaged with group instructions. As a result, our approach focused more on behaviour management and less on promoting skill development. Assessment, which often relied on 'sporty' attributes, how stronger, faster or agile an individual is based on others in the class, failed to reflect the true developmental progress of pupils, especially those working towards specific EHCP (Education, Health, and Care Plans) targets, such as increasing engagement, improving motor skills, and following instructions.

Continuous provision seemed to offer a promising alternative by allowing students to engage in individualised, sensory-friendly (an area to support self-regulation with objects that supported transition and had elements of fundamental development such as fine motor skills), and communication-focused learning experiences. It would also enable us to adapt our assessment framework to more effectively track progress based on each pupil's unique goals.

Designing a More Inclusive PE Curriculum

In considering how to adapt our PE curriculum, we recognised that a one-size-fits-all approach would not meet the needs of our diverse learners. Our new framework for inclusive PE aimed to:

1. **Adjust Skill Level Expectations:** Tailor tasks to suit varying abilities, allowing students to progress at their own pace.
2. **Encourage Effort, Not Just Results:** Shift the focus away from competition and achievement toward personal effort, improvement, and participation. This approach emphasises all forms of progress within a supportive environment: Create a safe space for students to explore, fail, and try again without fear of judgment.

By focusing on these goals, we aimed to reduce anxiety and foster an environment where neurodiverse students could thrive. Anxiety of pupils differed from age and pathway. Some pupils had anxiety of the transition to PE, some of the competition of PE seeing others they thought were 'better' than them, other more complex needs pupils - the anxiety of following a structured session. With all forms of anxiety the goal was for this to be reduced

The Implementation of Continuous Provision

In practice, the continuous provision model involved restructuring PE lessons to allow students more autonomy. Instead of a structured lesson introduction, students were given the freedom to explore different stations, each designed to develop fundamental movement skills and sports-specific techniques. For example, in a basketball lesson, activities like dribbling or shooting were set up at various stations. Communication cards, created in collaboration with a speech and language specialist, provided clear, visual instructions for each activity, ensuring accessibility for students with communication challenges.

Crucially, this was not a circuit-style activity where students moved from one station to the next in a set order. Instead, students were encouraged to work at their own pace, exploring activities they found engaging. Staff supported individual or small groups of students based on their specific needs. The structure remained consistent over several weeks (for invasion games – basketball – the same shooting, dribbling, passing activities, same area for small group work, same area for 1:1 work. Activities were always set up in the same space) allowing students time to process and acclimatise to the new approach.



Example of how the sports hall was set up to allow for continuous provision in PE. Areas to develop fundamental movement skills, sports specific skills, 1:1 enhanced provision, small adult led directed group work.



The idea arose that we kept in one activity from the previous invasion game (football). This would be to track pupil previous learning but also to add some familiarity and continuity to the set up in the first sessions of a new sport.



Example of activity card for the pupils to follow at their own pace.

Activity cards were designed with greater degree of challenges but also allowing for individualised EHCP targets to be worked towards. A number of pupils in the trial groups had working with a peer as one of their targets.



Examples of sensory area, which still included some fine motor skill activities and now and next boards

Outcomes and Key Findings

The integration of continuous provision into our PE lessons resulted in several notable improvements:

1. **Increased Engagement:** Students who previously exhibited short attention spans began to stay engaged for longer periods. For example, some pupils who would typically leave the sports hall within five minutes now remained actively engaged for 30 minutes or more. This shift in behaviour was a key indicator of the success of the continuous provision model.
2. **Enhanced Skill Development:** The flexibility of continuous provision allowed teachers to provide more individualised support, enabling students to progress

in skill development at their own pace. Pupils who were previously disengaged were able to work more effectively with staff to refine their skills.

3. **Improved Self-Regulation and Transitioning:** For students who struggled with transitions, the continuous provision model allowed them time to self-regulate before joining an activity. This reduced anxiety and supported smoother transitions into physical activity.
4. **Positive Behavioural Outcomes:** The non-competitive nature of the environment, combined with the ability for students to explore and engage at their own pace, led to fewer disruptive behaviours. Pupils were more likely to remain engaged and less likely to disengage through avoidance behaviours.

Key Benefits of Continuous Provision in PE

- **Individualised Learning:** Continuous provision allows for tailored learning to PE targets and their EHCP targets.
- **Support for Sensory Needs:** The flexibility of continuous provision addresses the sensory challenges faced by neurodiverse students, providing a more controlled and supportive environment for engagement.
- **Fostering Communication:** The use of Total Communication Cards and other supportive resources helps students develop communication skills, facilitating their ability to express themselves through movement or alternative methods.
- **Time for Individual Attention:** Teachers can observe and interact with students more meaningfully, ensuring that their specific needs are met and that EHCP targets are integrated into the PE experience.
- **Encouraging Exploration and Problem-Solving:** The open-ended nature of continuous provision fosters creativity and critical thinking, encouraging students to solve problems and engage with activities in a self-directed manner.

Implications for Future Practice and Research

The success of continuous provision at Durham Trinity has led to its expansion across the department and has been shared with mainstream schools as part of the Youth Sport Trust's Lead Inclusion Schools programme. Early feedback suggests similar improvements in engagement and anxiety reduction, particularly among neurodiverse pupils in mainstream settings.

Future research could explore the scalability of this approach in secondary school settings, particularly among older students who may struggle with confidence and

engagement. There is also potential to examine how continuous provision can be adapted for different age groups, cognitive abilities, and types of neurodiversity.

Conclusion

Continuous provision in PE offers a promising approach to supporting SEND pupils, particularly those with neurodiverse needs. By prioritising individualised learning, fostering a supportive environment, and focusing on effort and progress rather than fixed outcomes, continuous provision not only meets the educational needs of SEND pupils but also supports their emotional and social development. Although it requires adaptation to suit different educational contexts, the findings from Durham Trinity suggest that continuous provision is a highly effective strategy for increasing engagement, reducing anxiety, and promoting a positive, inclusive learning environment in PE.