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## Swimming Education in England: A Comparative Historical Study

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### **Abstract**

This paper builds on a doctoral study conducted as a socio-historical analysis of swimming in Britain from 1840 to 1914, which emphasised the relationship between growing urbanisation and the transformation of swimming from a recreative activity into an urban recreation and 'modern' competitive sport. The progress of swimming education was a particular focus in the original study and will underpin the approach taken in this comparative analysis. The central purpose of this paper is to re-visit these historical findings, to explore the contemporary situation with regard to swimming education and to present initial findings as to the rationale for the relatively slow progress and minimal advances made in the availability and provision of swimming education within English schools in the twenty first century. This is a qualitative, historical study and data has been gathered from a variety of sources including, government papers, curriculum and Board of Education documents, swimming governing body reports, newspaper articles and contemporary texts and journals. The data is examined using a critical textual analysis and illuminates similarities in the rationale for swimming education between the late nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries and also uncovers antecedents to the current debates, regarding the values attributed to swimming.

## Introduction

Over recent years, a major concern throughout the western world has been the declining physical activity levels and unhealthy lifestyles of all citizens, but particularly the school aged child. This debate has served to focus attention on the provision, status and definition of Physical Education (PE) within schools. In particular, David Kirk's (1992) *Defining Physical Education: The Social Construction of a School Subject in Postwar Britain* provides an excellent review of the changing nature of the subject throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whilst swimming has only ever been a small part of the PE syllabus and school curriculum, as a physical activity it has been and remains one of the most popular recreational activities in Britain and is one of only a few activities that can legitimately claim lifelong appeal.<sup>1</sup> Advocates of swimming have for over a century highlighted the health and safety benefits of learning to swim. Despite this it has been largely ignored as a subject for investigation, in either historical or contemporary education research. Debates on PE curriculum change and particularly the inclusion or exclusion of specific activities, do not appear to have been consciously informed by history.<sup>2</sup> Yet knowing and understanding what happened in the past, should always be a part of informing policy change in the future, as Cohen and Manion stated:

Historical research in education can show how and why educational theories and practices developed. It enables educationalists to use former practices to evaluate newer emerging ones.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst Travers observed:

So often education has moved through cycles of ideas only to return, ultimately to the starting point. A better understanding of the history of ideas in education would prevent much activity that has been called 'rediscovering the wheel'. So often a great new educational program is little more than one that had been in vogue thirty years previously.<sup>4</sup>

Or in the case of swimming education, as this paper will identify and discuss, the ideas and rationale from over one hundred years previously are often recycled with only minor changes to the language used to bring them into contemporary context. The difficulty for the historian of any period however, is that historical research, unlike other forms of research must deal with data that already exists and for the historian interested in nineteenth century

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<sup>1</sup> Penney, D., Clarke, G., Quill, M. and Kinchin, G.D. (Eds) 2005: 187

<sup>2</sup> Although there has been widespread and continuing debate regarding the terminology, status and content of PE, as Kirk, D. (1992) comprehensively illustrates.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, L. and Manion, L. 1992:49

<sup>4</sup> Travers, R.M.W. 1969 quoted in Cohen and Manion 1992:54

swimming education this means an over reliance on the 'official record'. Whilst government and sports governing body records indicate what should or would be optimal in terms of swimming provision and participation, they can only ever provide partial or fragmentary evidence. For a more complete picture of actual practice, evidence from a variety of sources, such as lobby groups, newspaper articles, sports journals and biographies have to be considered and analysed. It is the analysis, criticism and interpretation of these sources, which is the fundamental skill in writing history.<sup>5</sup> Also as E.H. Carr concluded in his 1964 seminal work *What is History?* 'The historians 'facts' belong in the past, but the historian is situated in the present, therefore history is an unending dialogue between past and present'.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately as Phillips stated:

The past is what actually occurred while history is what historians make of the past. Historians can never recover the past because the content is limitless, but they can offer a selection of the past; historians can never recover the past because the past is gone, but they can offer an interpretation of the past; historians can never recover the real past as they are of the present, but they can offer versions of the past viewed through the present... Given this interpretation history is best understood as a discourse about the past.<sup>7</sup>

What this paper attempts to represent therefore, is one discourse or dialogue between swimming education in the past and present. To uncover the many facets of swimming education both in the late nineteenth / early twentieth century and in contemporary England is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>8</sup> The paper therefore will concentrate upon learning to swim in the primary school sector. It will be divided into 2 main parts firstly evidence from the late nineteenth / early twentieth century will be looked at and then data from contemporary England will be examined. The objective throughout will be to look at not only the provision, but also the rationale and value placed on swimming by a variety of educational agencies over the two centuries. In order to do this the paper will be divided into the following sub-sections:

#### Swimming Education in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century England:

- The influence of sports governing bodies.
- Swimming instruction and its place on the curriculum.
- The teaching of swimming.
- The training of swimming teachers.
- Competitive swimming in schools.

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<sup>5</sup> Marwick, A. 1989:380

<sup>6</sup> Carr, H.E. 1964, quoted in Marwick, A. 1989:21

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, M.G. 1998:100

<sup>8</sup> A swimming education could encompass a tremendous variety of activities, including learning to swim, competitive swimming, water polo, synchronised swimming, life saving skills, personal survival skills, water safety and diving.

## Swimming Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century England:

- The 2003 Swimming Charter
- The Influence of sports governing bodies.
- The place of swimming in the National Curriculum for Physical Education.

## **Swimming Education in 19<sup>th</sup> Century England**

The popularity of swimming and the opportunity to swim in urban England had increased significantly throughout the nineteenth century, primarily with the passing of the 1846 Baths and Washhouses Act, which had enabled many towns and cities to build public bathing and swimming facilities.<sup>9</sup> Despite this increase in facilities, the swimming ability of many remained poor, as was evident by the increasing number of deaths from drowning.<sup>10</sup> The teaching of swimming therefore, particularly to young people, became a prominent feature and priority for many educational agencies from state schools to voluntary organizations.

The desire of educational agencies and social reformers to increase the provision of swimming teaching was bound up with the continuing wider social concerns of the physical and moral health of urban youth, from all social classes. The Victorian era was preoccupied with questions of health, especially with how the mind and body influenced each other and with the consequences of disease and degeneracy on both. To counter many of these concerns, there was a widespread perception that the main requirement was the provision of constructive and morally appropriate physical exercise within school and challenging rational recreations outside formal education.

The concept of rational recreation had largely been found to be unworkable for the adult urban masses, but many still felt it possible to inculcate respectability and self-reliance to young people. Education was seen as the best method of achieving these aims and particularly as formal education became available to rising numbers of young people from the 1870s onwards.<sup>11</sup> The education system in its various guises was at the end of the

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<sup>9</sup>The 1846 Baths and Wash-houses Act was a permissive piece of legislation, which enabled those local authorities that wished to adopt the Act the opportunity to build baths.

<sup>10</sup> Death by drowning remained high throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century; for example, in 1878 there were 3,659 deaths in England and Wales, the highest in 20 years.

<sup>11</sup> The Forster Education Act 1870 had extended elementary schooling to all children in England and Wales, but attendance was not compulsory until 1880 and only free from 1891, with the majority of children leaving at the minimum age of 12 years.

nineteenth century 'shifting towards a more explicit philosophy of the development of the whole person, morally, academically and physically, as a preparation for the rights and responsibilities of full citizenship'.<sup>12</sup> Sport too was becoming more diverse, 'with individual sports acquiring greater value and new, physically challenging activity, usually outdoors, assuming a more prominent place'.<sup>13</sup> However, what had not changed substantially was the limited access to physical education and sporting opportunity across the classes.

Until the early decades of the twentieth century, there was little interest in the physical education needs of working class children. Participation in physical exercise for the overwhelming majority of school children consisted of 'drill on military lines fleshed out with some more general exercise'.<sup>14</sup> Limited money, space and time ensured physical drill fitted the requirement of providing basic physical exercise to large numbers of children and more importantly, it also served the purpose of instilling discipline into the ranks, especially among working class boys. Working class girls fared a little better, with the introduction of Swedish gymnastics to the London Board schools in the 1880s and the Swedish system gradually took over the physical education of all elementary school girls.<sup>15</sup>

By the turn of the century, the 1902 Education Act did recommend a wider programme of PE and many boys' departments had moved steadily towards the introduction of elements of the Swedish system into their programmes.<sup>16</sup> Also from the 1890s team games for boys had been encouraged by school inspectors and taken on by volunteer male teachers, out of school hours. Then in 1900, games were encouraged by the Board of Education as a suitable alternative to drill or Swedish exercise, but the 'reality was that games were impractical in most urban elementary schools because of lack of space and facilities'.<sup>17</sup> Even with a new *Syllabus of Physical Exercise* in 1904 and again in 1909, it remained the case that 'far too little continued to be done to care for the bodies of the children of the masses' and PE provision remained 'mechanistic, with no systematic provision made for games'.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Influence of Sports Governing Bodies.**

Against this background various agencies from voluntary groups to individual social reformers had pressed government to provide a wider variety of physical activities to schoolchildren. The governing body for swimming the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) was one organization that was well placed to press government to consider the merits of a swimming education more fully. The primary objective of the ASA from its inception had been 'to

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<sup>12</sup> Warren, A. 1993: 58

<sup>13</sup> Warren, A. 1993:51

<sup>14</sup> Holt, R. 1989:139

<sup>15</sup> McCrone, K.E.1991: 161

<sup>16</sup> Holt, R. 1989:139

<sup>17</sup> McCrone, K.E. 1991:163

<sup>18</sup> McCrone K.E. 1991:164

encourage swimming teaching to school children'<sup>19</sup> and from the 1890s it continually lobbied government to include swimming within the teaching code.<sup>20</sup>

One of the key members of the ASA executive in the early 1900s was Mr Harold E. Fern. He went onto become the Hon. Secretary of the Association for almost 30 years, from 1921 to 1950 and was a legendary influence not only on the development of the ASA, but swimming in general. His early period of service on the executive was characterised by his educational promotions, which included public lectures, publications, demands for more bathing facilities and campaigns to encourage swimming for schools. One publication in 1912 titled *The Promotion of Swimming* claimed that swimming should be taught for three special reasons:

1. It is unequalled as a method of attaining physical perfection.
2. It inculcates a love of cleanliness, which is the foundation of good health.
3. It is a means of saving human life.<sup>21</sup>

Such formidable advocacy on the merits of swimming had however seen little progress towards its inclusion on the school curriculum. The ASA had succeeded in persuading the Board of Education to include swimming as a formal part of the *Code of Education* in the 1890s. This venture was a qualified success, for as Keil and Wix noted:

The code had the status of being a document expressing aspiration and was not prescriptive. The application of the Code depended on the funds made available by school boards who were elected by ratepayers. The basic needs of literacy and numeracy absorbed the lion's share of the education budget.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the lack of financial support from government, many local authorities went ahead and provided regular access to swimming baths to significant numbers of school children, often free of charge or for a nominal fee. The Baths and Wash-houses Committees Minutes of the major towns and cities from the late nineteenth century, all reported unanimous agreement in a reduction to the price of entry for school children to their baths, while many also provided free entry at specific times. Whilst such measures did enable more children access to the baths, it remained the case that there were insufficient swimming facilities to cater for the increasing demand. Children were generally allocated the more inferior second-class baths, at the most

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<sup>19</sup> Fern, H.E., Wilson, J. and Wraith, F.G. 1912: 1

<sup>20</sup> The first governing body for swimming the Association of Metropolitan Swimming Clubs (AMSC) was formed in 1869. Several name changes to the association took place until it became the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) in 1886.

<sup>21</sup> Fern, H.E., Wilson, J. and Wraith, F.G. 1912: 1

<sup>22</sup> Keil, I. and Wix, D. 1996:24

unpopular times.<sup>23</sup> Also, although easier access was beneficial for children and helped the baths revenue, what many children required was swimming instruction.

### **Swimming Instruction and its Place in the Curriculum.**

The variability in the standard of swimming instruction was however a concern. Many swimming teachers were volunteers with no formal training, as the swimming press identified when it highlighted 'the debt many communities owed to the public spirited gentlemen amateurs who have for years undertaken the teaching of swimming to school children'.<sup>24</sup> Once again it was the ASA that set about tackling this problem, when in 1890 'the ASA sensitive to the demand in many areas for competent swimming teachers for children, offered the services of members who were competent to teach swimming, free of charge to the Board of Education'.<sup>25</sup> Several Local Authorities, including London took up the ASA's offer and by 1904 *The Municipal Journal* was able to report that 'several authorities have also appointed specialist swimming teachers, whose wages are paid either by the Education or Baths Committees'.<sup>26</sup>

Progress was though uneven and many school children still received inadequate or no swimming instruction. The ASA in conjunction with the Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS) continued to lobby the Board of Education, at various times between 1890 and 1914, but little improvement in swimming education or related facilities was evident. Collaboration with the National Union of Teachers (NUT) in 1914 provided an important opportunity for persuading the state education system to consider changes to the PE syllabus and to elevate swimming onto the curriculum.<sup>27</sup> A conference was held between the two bodies in September 1914, with the conclusion that representatives from the NUT and the ASA, should approach the Board of Education with the following 4 resolutions:

1. The encouragement of Local Education Authorities in the provision of swimming facilities.
2. That where facilities are provided, the time taken up by swimming should be considered as a part of the time to be devoted to physical exercise .
3. Land exercises for teaching swimming and life saving be included in the number of 'free' exercises contained In the drill course.
4. The Code of Education, issued in 1905, should include the suggestion that where public baths are available, swimming and life saving should be taught.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Parker, A.C. 2003: 234-238

<sup>24</sup> Sinclair, A and Henry, W. 1893:377

<sup>25</sup> Sinclair, A. and Henry, W.1893: 377

<sup>26</sup> *The Municipal Journal*, 15 April 1904: 304

<sup>27</sup> Parker, A.C. 2003: 242

<sup>28</sup> ASA Handbook 1919:174

Despite strong representations from the NUT, in their support for the inclusion of swimming into what teachers considered was an already overloaded curriculum and from the ASA and medical experts on the health, cleanliness and life saving benefits of swimming, the deputation only partially succeeded in its aims. In his summary to the delegation the President of the Board of Education stated that he wanted 'the members present to understand that as a general principle, the Board was desirous of encouraging the provision of facilities for children to learn to swim, and of that subject being regarded as part of the physical exercises which might be embodied in the curriculum of schools'.<sup>29</sup> Overall by 1914, the ASA had managed to ensure swimming was counted as part of the time required for physical exercise, (which at the time was considered to be a minimum of one hour per week) and that land drills for swimming and life saving, could be taught in the time taken for physical exercises.<sup>30</sup> It had failed though to achieve its principal aim of securing the inclusion of swimming onto the PE curriculum.

### **The Teaching of Swimming.**

Despite this setback the ASA continued to work strenuously to improve the teaching of swimming and in particular the status and qualifications of swimming teachers. There was wide variation in how children were taught to swim and who they were taught by, ranging from the class teacher, head teacher, bath attendant, bath superintendent, 'professional' swimmer to specialist swimming instructors appointed by the Education Department.<sup>31</sup> Most of these teachers had little or no training, some, but particularly the 'professional' swimmer, would claim to have developed the quickest and easiest method of learning to swim.

The difficulties in teaching swimming were further compromised by the inadequate facilities that were made available and the number of children in the water at one time. Often large classes of children had to share the facilities with the general public and only a small area of the pool was suitably shallow enough for teaching non-swimmers. Whilst in some cases children had no formal instruction at all, with the class teacher accompanying the pupils primarily to supervise behaviour on the poolside.<sup>32</sup> The numbers of children in the pool and the numbers of teachers present obviously influenced the amount of teaching that was possible. Wide variations seemed to have occurred, with some authorities allowing 15 to 25 pupils per teacher, whilst others claimed up to 100 boys and 50 girls attended at one time, or in the

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<sup>29</sup> ASA Report – Teaching of Swimming in Elementary Schools April 18<sup>th</sup> 1914:16

<sup>30</sup> ASA Handbook 1919:174

<sup>31</sup> Professional swimmers were predominately men (there were only a handful of female professionals) who earned their living from swimming - by competing in swimming races, undertaking special swimming feats, writing books and teaching swimming. They often titled themselves 'professor' of swimming.

<sup>32</sup> Parker, A.C. 2003:244



case of Nottingham that 24 girls could attend at a time, but the number of boys was not limited!<sup>33</sup>

To overcome the problem of teaching large numbers of children, in inadequate facilities, with few qualified teachers available, land swimming drill was adopted in schools.<sup>34</sup> Schools used various land drill methods, primarily during the winter months when the baths were closed. Claims were made that after a course of land drill instruction children 'were able to swim across the bath within ten minutes of entering the water'.<sup>35</sup> The reliability of such claims was debatable, but land drill did give many children a basic idea of the swimming stroke, even if it was not always so easily transferable to water. A number of land drills existed and from these the RLSS drew up a set of exercises, which became commonly used in schools. In the RLSS scheme all the exercises were performed standing up, as lying across benches or chairs was considered to put too much pressure on the abdomen.<sup>36</sup> Although later, illustrations depicted pupils lying over the back of another pupil on all fours, to enable the exercise to be practiced horizontally and in a more realistic way. The tone and methods of instruction for land swimming drill bore many similarities to the former military drill, with children standing in 'ranks' and being 'dressed' with all the movements being done to the count.<sup>37</sup> In 1915 a *Text Book of Land Swimming Drill* was published, in which the exercises were performed to music and the following chorus:

If you want to be a man and play a useful part,  
To the credit and the glory of the nation.  
You must understand the greatest sport of all,  
And learn about the art that's called natation.  
And thus will be ready to save another's life,  
You'll know at the call how to do so,  
Then you may some day place your name  
On the endless role of fame  
That's intended to denote a British hero.<sup>38</sup>

The addition of music to the drill was intended to make the activity more enjoyable and swimming drill could claim to be more educationally sound than military drill. However, the overriding reason for its inclusion was another form of economical exercise for the urban school population. Introducing children to swimming using land drills, continued well into the twentieth century. The ASA as late as 1922 claimed, 'land exercises allowed the preparation of many of children during the winter months, with a view to taking full advantage of the

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<sup>33</sup> *The Municipal Journal*, 15 April 1904:304

<sup>34</sup> Land swimming drill was claimed to have introduced in England in 1876, from an adapted version of systems used by the French and German armies. Club swimmers initially ridiculed the method. Sinclair, A. and Henry, W. 1893:55-6

<sup>35</sup> *The Municipal Journal*, 17 June 1904:482

<sup>36</sup> Sinclair, A. and Henry, W. 1893:55

<sup>37</sup> *Swimming for Health, Exercise and Pleasure*, 1906, by Experts: 10

<sup>38</sup> Newman, C. 1915:10

bathing season and would ensure the most economical use of the existing accommodation'.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Training of Swimming Teachers.**

Despite the claims that land drill did at least provide children with the basic mechanics of swimming, it could never replace actual instruction in the water from a qualified teacher. Once again it was the ASA who highlighted this necessity and placed a priority on the training of swimming teachers. It proved to be a powerful governing body in this respect and was one of the first sports bodies to develop a systematic programme for the training of teachers in its own sport.<sup>40</sup> The statement in the ASA's 1904 Handbook is evidence of this commitment:

The aim of the ASA is to raise the status of professional teachers and to bring under the notice of schools, institutions and bathing authorities the importance of having a properly qualified and properly paid teacher in future.<sup>41</sup>

Payment to swimming teachers caused difficulties for some, with regard to their amateur status, but the need to establish a recognised professional qualification ensured the ASA instituted a Professional Certificate in 1899. No practical or theoretical tests had to be passed in order to gain the certificate. Applicants had only to satisfy the district executive committee 'of their character and antecedents and ability as a professional teacher'.<sup>42</sup> By 31 December 1900 the ASA had awarded 26 Professional Certificates to male and female candidates.<sup>43</sup> To control more tightly the quality of candidates who were awarded the certificate, it was revised in 1910, to include both a theoretical and practical examination. A demonstration of teaching the breaststroke, backstroke and breathing, were the elements in the theory test and a demonstration of the style, rather than speed formed the practical test. All candidates also had to possess the bronze medallion of the RLSS. This more stringent test did not deter applicants and by the end of 1913, the total number of professional Certificates awarded had risen to 383.<sup>44</sup>

Establishing a reputable qualification, by which competent swimming teachers were recognised, helped elevate the position of teachers themselves and must have improved the quality of much of the swimming instruction, but proportionally the numbers of qualified teachers remained very small. Nonetheless, the work of the ASA had ensured a more systematic and standard form of teaching was in place by 1913 and for those who sought the help of a qualified teacher at their local baths or swimming club, their chance of receiving competent instruction was greatly increased.

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<sup>39</sup> Baxter, F. 1922:11

<sup>40</sup> Parker, A.C. 2003: 247

<sup>41</sup> ASA Handbook 1904

<sup>42</sup> Keil, I. And Wix, D. 1996:25

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

## Competitive Swimming in Schools.

Through sound teaching many pupils became extremely proficient swimmers and the development of a competitive swimming structure within schools began to flourish and provided children from all social classes, with the opportunity to compete in events from inter-class to national championships. Schools swimming competition was one of the earliest sports to be organised by state schools, when it developed throughout Britain in the latter years of the nineteenth century. A motivating factor in the early formation of well-organised state school swimming competitions may have been civic pride. Many towns were clearly keen to demonstrate the swimming ability of pupils attending their schools.

In England school competitions were promoted by the new, rapidly forming Schools Swimming Associations (SSA). London Schools Swimming Association (LSSA) was one of the first to be instituted in 1891, but several towns and cities soon followed, for example Nottingham in 1891 and Sheffield in 1895. The main aim of the School Swimming Associations was to 'devote attention to the teaching of swimming and life saving in Public Elementary Schools' and as the London Association claimed, 'to promote collective ability and general efficiency'.<sup>45</sup> Competitive events were a natural extension of school swimming lessons, once large numbers of children had been taught to swim. The Schools Swimming Association was the initial provider of these competitive opportunities, although their ethos of promoting 'collective ability' meant that most of their competitions were team not individual events.

Another key provider of both swimming instruction and competitive opportunity was the local swimming club. Many clubs soon saw the opportunity of boosting their numbers through junior members and the inclusion of swimming events for schools was a common feature at club galas.<sup>46</sup> Liaison between the local schools and the swimming club became a key feature of many clubs' activities. They not only provided swimming teaching at the schools and on club nights, but also promoted and encouraged pupils to participate in all the activities offered by the club, such as life saving, water polo, diving, synchronized swimming and competitive swimming events.<sup>47</sup> All of which were considered beneficial to the physical health, cleanliness and moral training of urban school children.

Swimming education in English elementary schools by the turn of the twentieth century had progressed significantly over the preceding 30 years. It was considered a valuable and even vital activity by many educational agencies, with the healthy, challenging and life saving nature of the activity being deemed as particularly important for the youth of urban England.

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<sup>45</sup> *Swimming Magazine*, October 1916:115

<sup>46</sup> Nottingham Swimming Club in 1894 claimed 'the distinctive feature of its programme was the number of races set apart for juveniles' and 8 Public Elementary Schools had entered the team Championship. *Nottingham Daily*, Sept 1894:7

<sup>47</sup> Parker, A.C. 2003: 241

Despite forceful lobbying from the ASA, RLSS and the NUT to the Board of Education it had not however, managed to become included as a mandatory element on the school curriculum. The ASA continued to work tirelessly to improve the provision and status of swimming, particularly through its implementation of professional swimming teachers. It was the values attributed to swimming and the rationale behind its inclusion in schools that ensured it remained an important item on the education agenda into the twenty first century. The next part of the paper will examine the similarities between the past and present debates surrounding swimming and to tentatively determine whether significant progress has been achieved, in the nature and status of swimming education in England.

## **Swimming Education in 21<sup>st</sup> Century England**

The current situation with regard to swimming education within British primary schools can best be described as variable. On initial investigation the position may appear reasonably healthy and in most respects it would bear few similarities to that of a century earlier. For example, classes of children are not taught to swim using land drill. However, closer examination of the documentary evidence illuminates the striking similarities that exist between swimming education then and now, from the rationale for its inclusion, to the values attributed to swimming and the overall status of the activity within the education system. Also many of the circumstances that hindered the progress of swimming in the late nineteenth century, such as inadequate facilities, number of trained swimming teachers and its inclusion throughout all stages of the PE curriculum, are all issues that have yet to be fully addressed.

The rationale for swimming and its promotion as an ideal physical activity for children is possibly the most enduring feature from a century ago. Health and social disorder were the two major concerns of Victorian society and they remain prominent concerns within contemporary society. Although the focus of health has shifted from concerns about cleanliness and disease, to issues of lack of exercise and obesity and the character of social unrest has altered, the messages that have accompanied government statements about alleviating both these concerns, have always reaffirmed the value of physical activity and sport for the young. The following statement by Tessa Jowell, The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (2002) is just one among many that have been issued by recent governments:

The whole government knows the value of sport. Value in improving health and tackling obesity. Value in giving young people confidence and purpose, to divert them from drugs and crime. And values in the lessons of life that sport teaches us.<sup>48</sup>

Whilst swimming is only one of the sports that the government is referring to in such statements, the attributes of swimming as an activity, including its health benefits, life saving properties and its lifelong appeal, have ensured

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<sup>48</sup> Jowell, T. in DCMS/ Strategy unit, 2002.

that it has retained a positive profile and remains an activity for consideration in government initiatives.

### **The 2003 Swimming Charter**

One of the more recent government strategies '*The Physical Education, School Sport and Club Links*' (PESSCL) scheme identified 'swimming as having a significant role to play' and instituted within it the publication of a '*Swimming Charter*'.<sup>49</sup> The charter was compiled with the help of school teachers and school swimming professionals and it echoes many statements from nineteenth century publications, including giving 'practical advice to schools and local authorities on how to provide lessons effectively, with guidance on how to encourage more children to take part'.<sup>50</sup> While the charter goes on to request that local authorities 'take account of the social and health benefits of effective swimming provision – recognising it as one of the most cost effective ways of engaging large numbers of people in sport'.<sup>51</sup> In further similarities to the nineteenth century, the charter details the central role that local authorities have to play in providing school swimming, including the timetabling for swimming; pool access and facilities, and swimming teachers' training needs. The continuing pivotal role of the ASA in swimming education is also evident, with the charter detailing two pilot studies undertaken by the ASA into 'intensive tuition schemes for children who could not swim after regular school lessons'.<sup>52</sup>

The critical role of local authorities in the provision of school swimming was highlighted throughout the charter. In a series of bullet points the partnership and coordination requirements of local authorities were stressed and in order to make the most efficient use of resources local authorities were asked to:

- Consider the location of any new pools to ensure that the pools available to schools meet the access needs of all pupils.
- Consider which elements of the curriculum can be delivered away from the pool.
- Supply help with teaching, training, changing, supervision, life guarding etc.<sup>53</sup>

The cost of hiring pools was identified as a major problem for schools and the charter suggests that where possible, local authorities and LEAs could help schools overcome this burden by 'buying pool access during off-peak time when costs are reduced'.<sup>54</sup> Whilst for schools considering top-up lessons one option that schools and local authorities may consider offering were

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<sup>49</sup> *Swimming Charter 2003*, Department for Education and Skills: 1

<sup>50</sup> *Learning Through PE and Sport: An update on the national PE, School Sport Club Links Strategy: DCMS, Education and Skills*

<sup>51</sup> *Swimming Charter 2003*: 3

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> *Swimming Charter 2003* :3-4

<sup>54</sup> *Swimming Charter 2003*:10

'swimming incentives/vouchers entitling pupils to free access to pools and/or out of school hour swimming lessons'.<sup>55</sup> Whilst these issues are situated in the present and cannot be compared directly with nineteenth century conditions, local authorities are still being encouraged to provide greater access to pools for school children and to subsidise or provide free access. The costs of providing school swimming have remained a burden for schools and the greatest detriment to the activities expansion.

### **The Influence of Sports Governing Bodies.**

Another continuation from the nineteenth century has been the lobbying power of the ASA. The ASA has always maintained that 'swimming should be a part of physical education for all'.<sup>56</sup> During the twentieth century it has been involved in many aspects of promoting school swimming, including a succession of award schemes for swimming through to a 'pool for every school', which was an initiative and dream during the 1960s and 1970s, that sadly never came to fruition. It has also carried out its advocacy of swimming education in national forums, from the Central Council of Physical Recreation (CCPR), the Sports Council to the National Council for Physical Education.<sup>57</sup> However, its main priorities regarding school swimming have remained the inclusion of swimming on the PE curriculum and the education and training of swimming teachers.

With regard to improving the education of swimming teachers, the ASA had formed its own education department and through this it was one of the first sport's governing bodies to provide a comprehensive teaching programme for schools and to prepare a resource pack and support for school teachers.<sup>58</sup> The importance the ASA has placed on improving swimming teachers knowledge and expertise has not been without its difficulties. The increased demands and knowledge required by teachers attracted considerable attention during the 1970s. Partly in response to this the ASA developed the Institute of Swimming Teachers and Coaches (ISTC), but at the same time an alternative, rival body the Swimming Teachers Association (STA) was established. Although the two organisations tried to develop a partnership to represent professionally all swimming teachers, the two organisations went their separate ways. Division between the two organisations has resulted in a confused picture of swimming teacher education. However, the differences do not fully account for the continuing variation in who provides swimming teaching in schools, from school teachers, pool attendants, parents, other interested adults, to qualified swimming teachers. In this regard the situation is little different from the nineteenth century and despite the Swimming Charter identifying that 'local authorities should consider coordinating training provision' and that 'during initial teacher training, higher educational institutions should seek to ensure that adequate time is devoted to preparing

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Keil, I. and Wix, D. 1996: 129

<sup>57</sup> Keil, I. and Wix, D 1996: 130

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

all trainee teachers to teach swimming'.<sup>59</sup> It nevertheless remains the case that the quality of swimming teaching in primary schools is variable and is often not of an acceptable standard.

### **The Place of Swimming on the National Curriculum for Physical Education.**

A positive improvement to swimming education since the nineteenth century has been its inclusion as a compulsory subject in some stages on the National Curriculum. A National Curriculum for schools in England and Wales was put in place in 1988 with the Educational Reform Act. The curriculum was divided into four key stages and Physical Education as a foundation subject on the core curriculum at all four stages, has remained a vital part of education. The National Curriculum has had a number of revisions along the way, but at the last revision in 1999, the importance of PE as a core curriculum subject was clarified with a revised National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE).

The position of swimming within the NCPE has however had a far less positive outcome. The only stage at which swimming and water safety is a statutory activity is at Key Stage 2 (Year groups 3-6), in order that 'pupils achieve the teaching requirements outlined in the programme of study, unless already done so at Key Stage 1. Pupils should be able to swim unaided over a distance of 25 meters'.<sup>60</sup> Swimming is therefore an optional activity for schools at all other stages of the curriculum, where it is competing alongside the alternative choices of athletics or outdoor and adventurous activities for inclusion. With the result that swimming in many cases is the activity that is not undertaken, because once travel costs and time implications have been taken into consideration, it is seen to be financially prohibitive for schools. Even during the statutory Key Stage 2 phase, some schools are unable to fulfil the minimum requirements. This can mean that continuity in teaching and intensive blocks of swimming, which have been found to be the most beneficial in ensuring children learn to swim, are not undertaken. Pupils can therefore move onto Key Stage 3 as weak or non-swimmers and remain so as adults. The importance of the population being able to swim and again the health benefits of the activity, are though being recognised by government and swimming is now a core programme in the PESSCL strategy which emphasised that:

All children should be able to have the chance to swim safely and enjoy the sport. Learning to swim can be great fun, has health benefits and can save lives.<sup>61</sup>

Such recognition is a positive addition to the curriculum and a welcome acknowledgement from government of the value of swimming. The

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<sup>59</sup> *Swimming Charter 2003*: 9

<sup>60</sup> *Physical Education: The National Curriculum for England*, 1999, London, DfEE.

<sup>61</sup> DfES/DCMS, 2003:13

disappointing element is that such statements are not dissimilar to statements from one hundred years previously.

## Conclusions

This paper has examined aspects of the provision of swimming education within primary schools in the late nineteenth / early twentieth century and in contemporary England. It has identified that the rationale behind the promotion of a swimming education were broadly similar across the two centuries and stemmed primarily from social concerns regarding the health and welfare of English school children. The particular attributes of swimming , its health benefits, life saving benefits and life long appeal all helped to ensure that swimming was and has remained a key activity within the education system.

Nevertheless, the barriers encountered in the implementation of swimming onto the curriculum in the nineteenth century, namely the dearth and cost of swimming facilities and an uncoordinated programme of swimming teacher education, have continued to hinder the activities expansion within schools into the twenty first century.

The evidence has also indicated that swimming education has only made minimal advances since the early twentieth century, in its attempts to be included on the curriculum. Despite forceful lobbying from the ASA and numerous statements from government highlighting the value of a swimming education, swimming is only a mandatory element at Key Stage 2 of the NCPE. There have been encouraging strategies implemented by government, particularly the Swimming Charter within the PESSCL initiative, but again it could be argued that these measures are not enough to provide a comprehensive swimming education for all children.

Overall this paper has identified that despite the many historical parallels of swimming education across the two centuries, there is optimism that the essential place of swimming within education will remain and continue to improve.



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