

Teachers' reactions

The teachers in the study identified some important advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches to teaching games. It is interesting to note that what they saw as the advantages of Games for Understanding and the disadvantages of the skills-based approach all centred on the pupil:

- ★ *Games for Understanding encouraged the development of closer relationships with pupils; it allowed for greater insight into their levels of ability and provided more opportunities to observe them; the pupils were more involved, enjoyed themselves more and were better able to identify problem areas on which they needed to work;*
- ★ *the skill-based approach meant teachers were less familiar with pupils' levels of understanding; the distance between pupil and teacher was maintained; pupils were bored; and they acquired practiced skills in isolation without applying them in a game.*

In contrast, what the teachers saw as the advantages of the skills-based approach and the disadvantages of Games for Understanding all centred on the teacher:

- ★ *Games for Understanding lessons required more thought and preparation, and called for greater managerial and control skills;*
- ★ *skills-based lessons were less demanding to prepare and organise; the progression of work during them was clearer; it was easier to assess skills than concepts; and as pupils are limited in what they show the teacher, it is easier to give them feedback.*

Both teachers said skills-based lessons were much easier to prepare, organise and manage, with regards to pacing and progression. The teacher's control of the lesson stands out dramatically as a key factor.

As a practising teacher, I can relate to many of these comments. I moved from the familiar skills-based approach that I had been trained to use to a much less familiar Games for Understanding approach. I moved from a situation where I tended to completely dominate the lesson and direct all the pupils' activity to a situation that encouraged high levels of contribution and involvement from the students, which fostered the development of

independent thought and provided more opportunity for the students to interact with each other.

In moving from a skills-based approach to a Games for Understanding approach, I had put the child at the centre of the learning process.

Conclusion

Sometimes it is all too easy to lose sight of our prime objective: providing our children with the best physical education possible. Many teachers will have memories like my own of skills-based lessons punctuated by the familiar cries of, "When can we play a game?" as boredom and low motivation started to set in during repetitive, often static and generally meaningless skills practices. We now have to reflect on our practice and ask ourselves whether there is a different approach to teaching games that has something more to offer both pupil and teacher.

I would like to thank Rod Thorpe of Loughborough University, and the Teacher Training Agency.

Further reading

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Two different approaches to teaching within PE

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AIM

To compare the effectiveness of two approaches to teaching games in physical education: the skills approach and the Games for Understanding approach.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THIS CASE STUDY

- ★ Teachers have more opportunities to observe and assess pupils in lessons that use Games for Understanding.
- ★ Pupils are significantly more involved in planning and evaluation during Games for Understanding lessons.
- ★ Pupils with lower technical ability enjoy Games for Understanding lessons more and put more effort into them.
- ★ Pupils with lower technical ability have more positive attitudes to their ability in basketball and hockey after Games for Understanding lessons. More positive attitudes are also shown by the same group towards physical education in general.
- ★ Skills tests consistently show no decline in technical abilities when using Games for Understanding.
- ★ There is a significantly greater increase in knowledge and tactical understanding during Games for Understanding lessons.
- ★ From the teacher's point of view, Games for Understanding lessons require more thought and preparation and greater managerial and control skills, whereas skills-based lessons require the teacher to dominate and to dictate all the pupils' activity.
- ★ Teachers saw advantages for pupils in the skills-based approach and no disadvantages for pupils in the Games for Understanding approach.

A research project commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency as part of the Teacher Research Grant Scheme 1996/97

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Introduction

Games, the only area of activity compulsory throughout all four Key Stages, have traditionally dominated the physical education curriculum. They are important and are obviously here to stay. But what is the best way of teaching children games?

Games teaching is dominated by the traditional skills-based approach. This is characterised by a focus on teaching specific skills and techniques, and highly structured lessons involving warm-up, skills practices and final game.

An alternative Games for Understanding or games-based approach was developed in 1982. This is characterised by a focus on the development of tactical awareness and decision-making within the framework of an appropriate game, the use of modified games and the teaching of skills only when they are necessary.

Which approach is best?

You may be able to answer quite quickly whether you take a skills or games-based approach when teaching. But answering the following questions takes more time. Which method best encourages the development of physical performance? Which method best encourages the development of pupils as thinking practitioners and independent learners? Which method best encourages and develops planning and evaluation skills?

“In all skills tests, the level of development was as good, if not better, in the games-based classes.”

Which method best enables the teacher to assess the learning processes taking place? Which method enables National Curriculum objectives to be more readily met?

Methods

The research lasted 12 weeks and consisted of two studies. The subjects were 40 Year 9 boys playing basketball and 56 Year 8 girls playing hockey. Identical procedures were followed: three weeks of pre-testing; six one-hour weekly teaching sessions for each group; and three weeks of post-testing.

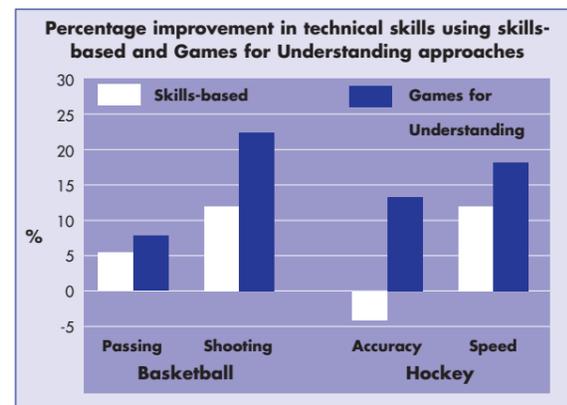
Two qualified physical education specialists (one male, one female) took part in the research – one in

each study. Both employed skills-based teaching, with one-half of the subjects and the games-based teaching approach with the other half.

A series of tests readily available to practising teachers were administered. These were the 1994 AAHPERD basketball test and the 1970 Henry-Friedel Hockey test. Pupils completed questionnaires relating to learning, self-concept, effort and enjoyment, while teachers reported on assessment opportunities, and planning and evaluation. Pupils also underwent skills, knowledge and understanding tests.

Skills development

One of the main arguments against a games-based approach has been the detrimental effect it is thought it might have on the development of technical skills. The following graph shows quite clearly this is not the case.



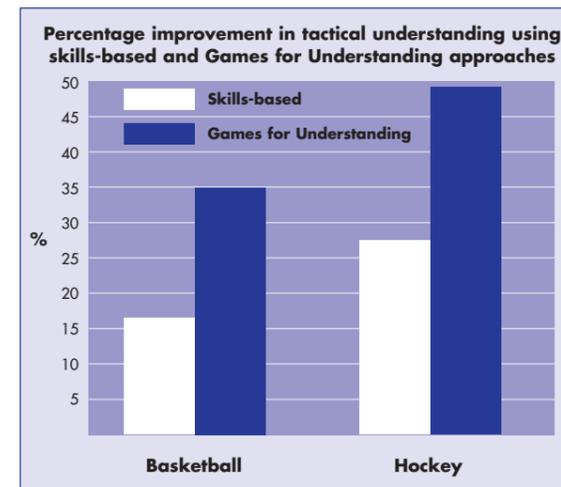
In all skills tests, in both studies, the level of skills development was as good, if not better, in the games-based classes.

Knowledge and tactical understanding

The other main advantage the pupils in the games-based classes have is that their technical skills have been developed within the appropriate context of the game. They have not been developed in isolation.

The technical advantages are hopefully accompanied by an increased understanding of when, where and why these skills should be used. The following graph illustrates this.

Not only have technical skills developed equally as well in the games-based classes, but also these clearly



encourage a greater improvement in understanding. Pupils in the games-based lessons showed a much greater appreciation of when to pass, shoot and dribble, and of factors influencing decision-making relating to the execution of skills, such as the position of team-mates and the opposition, and the time and space available. They are also more aware of the importance of appropriate support once a pass, shot or dribble is complete.

These two findings alone have important implications for the physical educationist. They become even more pertinent when National Curriculum objectives are considered.

Planning and evaluation

The National Curriculum states that children need to experience and develop planning and evaluation skills. Teachers are required to assess and report on progress in these areas. Surely a method of teaching that helps both pupil and teacher to meet these criteria would prove of great value to all concerned.

The findings showed the teachers in both studies felt the pupils were involved considerably more in planning and evaluation during games-based lessons than they were in skills-based lessons.

This conclusion was supported by the pupils themselves, who reported a much greater involvement in planning and evaluation during the games-based lessons.

Correspondingly, the teachers also reported that they had many more opportunities to observe and assess pupils during the games-based lessons.

Perhaps one of the major implications of the National Curriculum for physical education is that, by necessity, teachers will need to become more introspective and, if appropriate, adapt and develop the way they teach games. A shift to a more games-based approach would be a positive step towards meeting National Curriculum objectives: children would be able to become more fully involved in planning and evaluation; and teachers would have more opportunities and more time to assess these processes.

Pupils with lower technical ability

Thorpe and Bunker argued in 1986 that physically less able pupils often do not overcome the technical problems they may have when traditional teaching methods are used. This is likely to result in a sense of failure, low motivation and effort, a lack of enjoyment, poor self-concept and a subsequent inhibition about participation.

In both of the current studies many of these undesirable outcomes were confirmed. The pupils with low technical ability in the skills-based classes consistently reported low scores for enjoyment and effort and for how the lesson made them feel about their ability to play basketball or hockey – and about physical education in general.

By contrast, the pupils with low technical ability in the games-based classes consistently reported significantly higher, more positive scores for the same factors.

It appears that a skills-based approach serves only to highlight, confirm and reinforce – often publicly – the pupils' lack of physical ability. The games-based approach would seem to have more to offer less physically able pupils. In addition to exploring and experiencing other aspects of their physical education, they are allowed to develop their physical skills in a less-threatening environment. The child rather than the content is returned to the centre of the learning process.

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