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.
- Teachers saw advantages for pupils in the skills-based approach and no disadvantages for pupils in the Games for Understanding approach.

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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?

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 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 educator. 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.