Unlock Research
Research for Physical Educators

Research Report of the Month
JANUARY 2005

McCaughtry, N., Sofo, S., Rovegno, I., & Curtner-Smith, M. (2004).

Learning to teach sport education: Misunderstandings, pedagogical difficulties, and resistance.

European Physical Education Review, 10, 135-155.

To celebrate the New Year, Unlock offers a genuine triple-threat as the January Research Report of the Month. Here, in a single research report, you can learn something about: 1) Sport Education (SE) as a new physical education (PE) curriculum, 2) what can happen when novice PE teachers try to teach SE to middle school students, and 3) what a qualitative field study of teaching and teacher development can and cannot accomplish. Moreover, for at least some of us (and I include myself here) what can be learned from the report includes a number of things that we did not know, or, at least, had only suspected without any hard evidence.

It may come as a surprise to you, then, that although the conduct of this study must have taken an enormous amount of work on the part of a four-person research team, the research was designed to address a basic question in teacher education and did so in terms that will be familiar to both teachers and teacher educators. The methods used to collect and analyze data were relatively straight forward and easy to understand, and the results can be explained in terms of behaviors and events with which virtually every PE teacher has had some first hand experience. In other words, this is one you can understand, that may tell you some things you didn't know, and that deals with the realities of how people learn to teach.

SPORT EDUCATION

To fully appreciate this study you will need to have at least a general idea of what SE is and how it works. For those of you who have yet to encounter this new form of physical education, I am going to provide an overview. First, however, even those who already do know SE will be interested to learn that the report selected for this month's Unlock has reached print at an auspicious time. A revised edition of the book that introduced SE to physical educators, Daryl Siedentop's 1994 text, *Sport Education*, has just become available from Human Kinetics under the new title of *Complete Guide to Sport Education* (2004). Now adding Peter Hastie and Hans van der Mars as co-authors, Siedentop's text reflects a decade of research and carefully evaluated experience with SE in schools around the world. Thus, the curriculum now exists as much more than a theoretical model and a few development sites. In the new edition SE is fully embodied in 170 pages of specific directions for how to plan, use, adjust, and evaluate that form of physical education.

SE is a comprehensive model for physical education. It is both a curriculum and an integrated set of instructional strategies and tactics. The primary purpose is to develop competent, enthusiastic, and literate sportspersons. From that statement of intention you can detect an agenda that is not business as usual in the gym. Not only do SE teachers want to teach skills, but they also must (A) teach strategy and game tactics (which are needed if pupils are to be "competent" participants, (B) create conditions that preserve the fun, challenge, and importance of competitive play (which is essential if pupils are to become "enthusiastic"), and (C) introduce a whole range of supporting roles and functions (which are vital if pupils are to really be "literate" the culture of a sport).

Those goals are achieved by creating an authentic sport experience in which pupils learn by participating under conditions that in many regards resemble those of any serious competition. They are formed into teams that persist over time (sometimes for a semester or a year, but always for no less than a sport season), they engage in team practices that focus on preparation for upcoming games or challenge events, they engage in contests that have been modified to be developmentally appropriate for the school level involved, and they celebrate achievement and excellence through rituals and ceremonies. In addition, there is provision for learning to play many roles besides those of "player." Those include coach, captain, manager, trainer, referee, statistician, and publicist.

Almost any game or physical activity can be used, including SE versions of dance, weightlifting, gymnastics, and physical fitness. The model has been used at all school levels from third through the twelfth grade. A series of studies have shown that pupils like SE and persistently report preferring it over the traditional multi-activity curriculum.

With its strong emphasis on equity, fair play, and inclusion of all participants, some of the highest praise comes from students who begin either with relatively low skill or with physical limitations. The evidence also suggests that although it does require a period of adjustment for both pupils and teachers as they change their expectations for what constitutes physical education, the final quality of competitive play is far above that usually achieved in PE classes. It is assumed that this outcome results from learning conditions not unlike those of the tactical games approach (learning in game-like conditions rather than in decontextualized skill drills).

THE STUDY

Two groups of preservice teachers were studied: one group (G1) during their secondary methods and concurrent field teaching courses, and one group (G2) during a teaching experience (for independent study credit) in the year following their methods courses. Both groups taught SE units to middle-school pupils. Data were collected through field observations and interviews conducted by participant observers (the research team). Field notes, transcripts, and research logs were then analyzed to identify the main themes that best described the difficulties encountered by the novice teachers.

PARTICIPANTS AND CONTEXT

There were 17 undergraduates in G1, all of whom had just finished studying SE as part of their secondary methods class. As part of a related field practicum, they were teaching in a middle school for two half-days each week. First, the trainees were divided into two-person teaching teams. Then, in one combined seventh and eighth grade coeducational class with 49 pupils (meeting for 45 minutes twice each week), each teaching team was assigned its own group of seven pupils. The preservice students then taught their mini-classes a 10-lesson SE soccer "season." The teacher education staff helped the trainees prepare SE lesson plans and provided on-site supervision and support.

There were four undergraduates in G2, all of whom had finished the combined classroom/ practicum methods unit described above in the previous year. Under an independent study contract, they co-taught a 20-lesson SE volleyball unit to a class of 20 eighth grade female pupils. The 98-minute physical education classes met twice each week. In preparation for the SE unit, the preservice teachers in G2 met for four planning sessions: two prior to starting the unit and one each after lessons five and six.

DATA COLLECTION

For both undergraduate groups data were collected from all planning sessions, and from each lesson of the SE seasons. Particular attention was paid to how students handled each of the major elements in the SE model, how pupils responded, and how the teaching teams adjusted. Observers arrived early to be present during pre-class preparation, recorded field notes during the entire lesson, and stayed to observe and record both formal and informal debriefing sessions after each class. Each trainee was interviewed individually both at the start of the study and during the last week. In addition, informal conversations between researchers and participants frequently took place at the middle school site, providing the basis for additional field notes completed at the end of each day. For G1, 137 interviews produced 837 pages of transcription, and for G2, a total of 28 interviews (in individual and group settings) yielded 253 pages of text.

DATA ANALYSIS

The researchers read the accumulating record of field observation notes and interview transcripts looking for evidence of how the members of G1 and G2 were interpreting their task and learning how to teach sport education. Data were broken into logical segments and coded for content. Segments of text with similar codes were grouped into categories which were progressively refined as they grew. During this process, categories were periodically shared with the trainees to check for accuracy and further elaboration.

By the end of data collection, several categories had grown into three overarching themes that described the main pitfalls the trainees had encountered while implementing the SE model. The themes were fleshed out with illustrations and explanations and (after the study was completed) those interpretations were returned to the participants for final comment and verification.

FINDINGS

The three descriptive themes pointed to specific mechanisms that hindered the participants' efforts to learn how to teach SE. First, G1 teachers routinely struggled with the problem of using the game (or a game-like setting) to provide instruction on the tactics of game play. Recognizing that they were not being effective in that task, they retreated in one of two directions, either into non-instructional game play, or into decontextualized skill drills that were isolated from the realistic game context.

Second, G1 teachers progressively developed resistance to the SE requirement that they teach aspects of soccer beyond skills and rules (coaching, refereeing, keeping statistics, etc.). That is, they rejected the possibility that students could be interested in (or actually perform) such sport roles as publicist, statistician, trainer, or referee.

Third, and finally, the four preservice teachers in G2 revealed a profound misunderstanding of the role of skill development in SE. Their confusion on that point was so debilitating that until there was an intervention by the supervisor (after the fifth lesson) the instructors were unable to conduct classes that resembled genuine SE. The authors of the report offered an explanation for each of the three barriers to SE teaching performance.

The problem of teaching tactics. The retreat of G1 members from tactical game play instruction seemed to come from several sources. When students failed to quickly grasp such constructs as getting open for a shot, faking the defense out of position, passing in relation to the direction the defender is blocking, or executing a give and go, the instructors became flustered and panicked. Instead of recognizing the problem as an early stage of learning, and then re-teaching, or finding an alternative way to practice the skill within the game context, the novices began to do what was familiar and more comfortable for them – teach isolated skills in elementary drills.

A second aspect of the problem was the apparent fact that the participating teachers had not themselves explicitly thought about games in terms of recurring tactical situations and responses. They were used to practicing skills and then just playing the game, with the question of how and when to use those skills being left to a general and non-explicit kind of learning by osmosis. Teaching what to do in the game by working with beginners who were actually practicing in a game context simply had not been part of their experience.

The problem of teaching a whole sport rather than just sport skills. The resistance of G1 members to fully integrating all aspects of the SE model (either now or in the future) also appeared to arise from several sources. Despite some initial enthusiasm about SE during the methods course, once at the field site the G1 students were so impressed by the hard demands of a school workplace that they began to have serious doubts about the practicality of the model.

In teaching their SE unit, what the preservice trainees quickly gravitated toward was a traditional physical education class that included little of the real-world ambience of sport. Opportunities to do anything other than play the game were only sketchily introduced and lacked careful planning for practice or encouragement for student engagement. The result was a self-fulfilling prophesy. Pupils were uninterested in performing other roles in sport, made their rejection evident, and the entire nontraditional component of SE soon disappeared from lessons.

When questioned, the undergraduate students cited three reasons for excluding the full features of SE in their field unit (and being unwilling to consider SE as a viable alternative for their future): 1) it was too much work for a beginning teacher (working alone) who would be teaching multiple classes and probably coaching after school, 2) most of the excluded aspects of SE did not involve the pupils in physical activity and thus did not pursue what the teachers regarded as the primary missions of physical education, building physical fitness and acquisition of sport skills, and 3) ancillary sport roles involved demands for learning that simply were too difficult for the pupils and thus would be rejected as unreasonable and uninteresting. In sum, SE was seen by these preservice teachers as a model that might be novel, exciting, and even promising as an innovative curriculum, but it was far too complicated and time-consuming to be practical for use in school physical education.

The problem of teaching motor skills in realistic contexts. In the case of the G2 teachers, the main stumbling block in learning to teach SE was their assumption that individual skills have to be developed prior to game play. In reaching that erroneous conclusion they had failed to adequately distinguish the essential differences between SE and traditional PE instruction. In fact, SE only works if fundamental skills are taught throughout the unit in every possible context (warm-ups, practice sessions, game component drills, modified games, and full-scale competitions), because sporting participation can't be delayed if enthusiasm is to build.

Given their misinterpretation that SE can employ the usual PE procedure of "skill first and play later," the teachers planned and used long, repetitive drills. That agenda was immediately detected by their middle school pupils with predictable and unhappy results. An intervention by supervisors corrected the misunderstanding, but only after considerable loss of time and momentum.

DISCUSSION

The researchers were persuaded that the barriers to learning how to effectively implement SE were conditioned primarily by the long apprenticeship of observation served by the undergraduates during their own 12 years of school physical education. Undergraduates routinely entered their preparation program knowing only an approach in which each of the major skills in a sport was taught in isolation, in drills devoid of game complexity. Their own teachers had simply expected them to transfer those motor skills into the swift decisions and subtle performance adjustments required in a real game.

Thus, when confronted by SE, which is an approach that emphasizes both tactical knowledge and skill learning in the context of game participation, they were bound to struggle. The sport and the learners were the same, but now they had to make new and unfamiliar responses.

The undergraduate students were entirely correct, however, in drawing the conclusion that teaching SE would require extensive effort to implement successfully. What they misjudged was what research has repeatedly confirmed. Motor skills can be developed in games, modified games, and game-like practice activities. Further, simple forms of tactical knowledge and a degree of game sense can be learned when beginning pupils are given the opportunity to do so.

Finally, when the role demands are appropriately modified and sound instruction is provided, students also can learn how to perform any of the tasks required within a sport culture. Moreover, students have persistently reported that they enjoyed carrying out those responsibilities. When their efforts are not undercut by initial skepticism, teachers can produce authentic sport experiences in physical education classes.

IMPLICATIONS

The investigators did not find it difficult to derive practical implications from those findings. And, I suspect, neither have you. You can check your conclusions against the following bullet list.

- Forewarned is forearmed, and each of the barriers constitute a point that can be planned for and monitored in any training program that includes preparation for using SE.
- Teacher educators must repeatedly reinforce the differences between SE and other models for PE curriculum. It is difficult for novices to remember those differences when they are under stress and all of their previous experience points in a different direction.
- Teacher educators must be sensitive to the problem of finding a balance between helping trainees prepare for the rigors of induction into the teaching workforce, and helping them prepare for the enactment of a curriculum that is as complex and pedagogically challenging as SE.
- Trainees must be helped to understand the important value in all of the types of learning in SE. Game-specific motor skills are just the obvious tip that shows above a whole collection of other less visible outcomes, not least of which is the fun that comes from being swept up in a moment of playful sport.
- Everyone involved must understand that for the SE model to work it must be well-taught, frequently reinforced, and then re-taught whenever needed. One shot instruction will not produce a game-savvy player, a student coach, or an authentic experience.

To close, let me anticipate some questions that might arise for you concerning this study. You might reasonably ask such things as:

> Why was the SE season so short for G1? Ten weeks didn't really allow replication of the model.
>
> Why didn't the preservice students have opportunities to visit schools where ongoing SE programs could be observed (or where they could have early field experiences)?
>
> Why didn't they study third or fourth year teachers learning to do SE? It would be much more realistic if the participants didn't have to cope with all the stresses of being a preservice student still in training.
>
> Why were the mini-classes so small? They were not a real test of the students' ability to master SE.

> Why were there not more trainees participating in G2, and why did they have to teach only female students?

In response to questions like those I can only paraphrase a recent and now infamous observation made by one of our political leaders with regard to the conflict in Iraq. "Qualitative researchers have to go to study the programs we have, and not the programs we might wish to have." As this investigation was, in fact, an instance of self-examination, it took more than a little courage to share the results with an international audience of peers. I learned from their report, and I am sure they learned from what was discovered in their own program. To me, that sounds like a way for all of us to make progress.

Your comments on this annotation will be welcome at lflocke@hotmail.com.

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