Substituting Skill Learning for Traditional Games in Early Childhood

by David Belka

The traditional approach for teaching physical education in early elementary school has emphasized “fun” activities and many low-organized games. Tag, relays, and ball games come to mind. A series of publications from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE, 1992, 1995, 2000a, 2000b) provides a clearer focus for both preschool and early elementary school physical education. In particular, sample benchmarks (NASPE, 1992, 1995) provide guidelines for kindergarten through grade two that have to do more with gaining control over one’s own body and its movement.

Recent approaches to games instruction have a strong developmental and conceptual rationale (Allison & Barrett, 2000; Belka, 1994; Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2004) that emphasizes a child-centered, problem-solving approach toward teaching children how to move competently. This is in direct contrast to curricula designed mainly around low-organized games.

Early Childhood Developmental Readiness

Very young children are extremely egocentric and may still be in a stage of parallel play. Children at this stage play beside other children, though not really with them. Parallel play is an important phase in the development of young children. Children in the parallel play stage do not share well, nor can they cooperate well in large groups. For that reason, children should be organized to practice tasks alone with the focus on controlling their own body or an object. This results in individual tasks rather than the small group tasks often found in games. As children do solitary work in and among others, the parallel play aspect is present.

Bredenkamp and Copple (1997) indicate that children “enjoy and engage in many gross-motor activities for the first time” (p. 103) at three to four years of age, and repeatedly list balancing, locomotion skills, climbing and hanging, and other large-muscle skills as an appropriate focus for gross-motor development. Therefore, a wide variety of experiences needs to be included: in both indoor and outdoor areas, controlling one’s own body in balance and locomotion activities, manipulating objects (i.e., block play, riding trikes, and other wheeled toys as well as catching, striking, and other gross-motor skills; pp. 101, 103, 132).

Young children show uneven perceptual judgment and are in the preoperational stage of Piaget’s cognitive development theory. Therefore, the “child’s need to act on objects, interact with people, and think and reflect on their experiences” is vital (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997, p. 110). Children’s limitations here are egocentrism, inability to reason logically, attention and memory usage, and a tendency to become discouraged quickly if they experience repeated failure or frustration. The children’s needs and limitations indicate a need for self-testing activities that focus on controlling their own body rather than participation in low-organized, large-group games.

Children ages three to five years have difficulty using abstract concepts of time and space to organize their experiences (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). That is why imaginative play, imitative movement, rhythmic movement, and dance are very important (Bruce, 1998; Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). Taken together, the developmental aspects listed above point to implementation of activities that focus on exploring, gaining more control of their own body, and learning to use appropriate equipment as appropriate foci in gross-motor experiences for preschool-age children.

Children in kindergarten through second grade proceed to a sharing or cooperative stage of play. As the child matriculates into elementary school, partner work increases, frequently augmenting solitary practice. A tacit goal is cooperating to help the partner become a more skillful mover. More complex use of motor skills and more sophisticated cooperation with others is facilitated by an increased memory capacity and the use of memory strategies, more efficient brain functioning, better understanding of others, and an increased ability to work with others (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997).

These changes enable partners and small groups to cooperate in tasks in which they compete against the environment, as opposed to each other. Activities in which partners must cooperate or work together to “compete” against the environment have more educational value than large group and team competitive activities. Cooperation against the environment can include the following: how long a movement can occur without a mistake, how many consecutive trials can occur without a specified error, or how many successful attempts can be accomplished in a specified time period. These kinds of contests are called applications (Rink, 1998), or challenges (Graham et al., 2004).

Challenges or applications place stress on the developing skills. If an activity results in too little success, the children’s interest will wane. If the task is too difficult, it needs to be modified to something simpler so that more success is possible. If the task is matched to the skill levels of the children, they often remain interested without the challenge task. Five-year-olds often say, “Let’s play a game!” What they mean, and are happy to do, is a simple game of “Catch” with a partner. This activity can occur with no score, no competition, and no real challenge task (Rink, 1998).

Teachers who do not understand motor development may not understand how skill
tasks and subsequent challenge tasks are useful. Such teachers begin with low-organized games, failing to acknowledge that preschoolers and children in early elementary may benefit much more by postponing (or drastically reducing) large-group, competitive team activities. The question becomes, “What kinds of game-like activities might be substituted for low-organized games?” Or, “What fundamental movement skills might be emphasized to provide a more stable foundation for later game play?” Based on developmental readiness, early childhood is a time for extensive individual and partner and small group work in developing skill in basic manipulation skills (see Table 1).

### Focus on Developing Manipulation Skills

Receiving objects, sending objects away, and controlling objects comprise the manipulation skills. Catching and collecting are receiving skills. Throwing, striking, and kicking are sending skills. Hand dribbling and foot dribbling are two skills involved in controlling an object. The sample activities in Table 1 require considerable curricular time to achieve even a beginning mastery skill performance level for young children. Among preschoolers, almost all the curricular time allotted for games should be used for development of these skills. Likewise, a majority of that time should be used this way for children ages five through seven or eight years of age (Graham et al., 2004; Buschner, 1994; Purcell, 1994). In early elementary physical education, it makes sense to develop skill and mastery over an object prior to engaging in even low-organized games. Skill performance should be the main goal. As part of the developmental model, Graham et al. (2004) use Control to describe this phase of skill acquisition.

At a control level, the child shows intent via increased skill and mastery of the object, there is more consistency between skill attempts, and there is less extraneous movement (as compared to children at a precontrol level). While combinations of skills can be practiced, these combinations should be used in competitive games only when the teacher, utilizing motor development knowledge, deems children ready for those kinds of activities.

At five to eight years of age, children exhibit improved coordination in moving their bodies in space, controlling their movements, and sequencing a series of movement skills (Graham et al., 2004; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). To further facilitate mastery for children in this developmental range, use movement concepts to modify the manipulation skills (NASPE, 2000a, 2000b). Many tasks in Table 1 emphasize movement concepts such as space, effort, and relationships. Time spent developing movement concepts is more important that playing low-organized games.

The movement concepts described by current authors (Allison & Barrett, 2000; Buschner, 1994; Graham et al., 2004) are considered more important for young children than the low-organized games emphasized by teacher education programs of prior generations. It is better to have young children practice dribbling in a variety of pathways, or even trying to copy the pathways of others, than it is to use dribbling in a competitive activity such as a relay. Pathways are but one movement concept related to space. Other space concepts, such as location (personal and general), levels (high, medium, low), and directions (forward, backward, sideward) may be introduced in preschool (NASPE, 2000b) and subsequently refined in elementary physical education (NASPE, 2000a).

Within the effort category, time or speed are vital concepts that children use in locomotor and manipulation skills. Moving fast and slow, changing speeds, acceleration, (increasing speed), and deceleration (reducing speed) are all very important in many kinds of games.

### Locomotion and Body Control Skills

In addition to manipulation skills, gymnastics and rhythm and dance are also major emphases in developmentally appropriate preschool and elementary school programs. Foundational skills in body awareness, balance, and locomotion may be considered prerequisites for object control and manipulation.

Locomotion skills can be seen on playgrounds in voluntary and free-choice time. While observing a group of young children, one may see them practice a considerable variety of locomotion tasks. Several generations ago, there was sufficient practice in free-play situations that many children emerged with mature, or nearly mature, movement patterns. Due to extended periods of sitting, corresponding with the emergence of the information age and then the computer age, there is more need for practice and instruction in these locomotion skills.

### Table 1—Sample Activities: Emphasis on Mastery of Basic Manipulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Collecting and receiving skills, including catching</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Begin stationary. Add one or more steps as skill permits.</td>
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<td>b. Sender may be stationary for a long time, but later moves.</td>
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<td>c. Follow motor development principles: distance, height of catch, progress from no arc to low to higher arcs.</td>
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<td>2. Sending objects away</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Throw to stationary targets, then to smaller targets, then to moving targets.</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Receive an object and send it away to a target.</td>
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<td>c. Throw a lead pass to a partner.</td>
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<td>d. Strike a stationary object near thigh-height while standing, then a moving object with a slight arc at the same height.</td>
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<td>e. Strike a moving object at different heights, then one moving at a slight, then a wider variety of arcs.</td>
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<td>f. Kick a stationary ball while standing or with one step, then add more steps and approach from various angles as skill permits.</td>
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<td>g. Kick a slow-moving ball arriving near one's vertical midline, then from various angles, then with varying speeds.</td>
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<td>3. Controlling an object</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Hand-dribble in place, then traveling slowly.</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Hand-dribble while traveling slowly forward, backward, and sideways, then increase and change speeds as skill permits.</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Foot-dribble, changing direction, pathway, speed, and force as skill permits.</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Hand- or foot-dribble, passing to a stationary target or partner, then to a moving target or partner.</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Receive an easy pass. Try to reduce the time between receiving and beginning controlled hand- or foot-dribbling.</td>
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Table 2—Sample Activities: Emphasis on Mastery of Basic Locomotion

- Short bouts of a variety of locomotion skills both on and off the feet
- Extended practice learning to start and stop in balance
- Various locomotion skills combined with starting and stopping
- Running in various pathways or directions with variations of speed
- Locomotion skills with various combinations of directions and pathways
- Locomotion skills with changes of speed, including acceleration and deceleration
- Combinations of two or more locomotion types
- Transitions from one locomotion type to another
- Copying a partner’s locomotion and staying at a specified distance from the partner while emphasizing space, effort, and relationship concepts as directed

The activities in Table 2 illustrate some of these skills. The benefits of being proficient in starting and stopping, as well as staying balanced in a ready position, are so basic to most traditional games that the contributions of extended practice should be easy to see.

Locomotion and balance are fundamental to all subsequent movement skills. Tasks focused on the development of locomotion skills should be incorporated in all preschool and elementary school movement program lessons. Locomotion skills can easily be inserted in the early parts of each lesson, in place of lap running and adult-style warm-up activities. Combinations of various locomotor skills with starting and stopping also are needed. Young children have a higher center of gravity than adults and older children do, so multiple experiences in starting and stopping with balance and control are needed.

The activities described above are suggested as appropriate substitutions for the traditional low-organized games seen in many school programs for young children. Though a rationale has been provided that the emphasis on skill mastery and movement concepts is more important than teaching a variety of low-organized games, teachers need to clearly specify educational objectives for any and all activities. NASPE’s Moving Into the Future: National Standards for Physical Education (1995) and the Outcomes Project (NASPE, 1992) provide teachers with sample benchmarks with which to compare their objectives for low-organized games versus foundational skills. Physical educators should teach toward objectives that are more congruent with the national standards. Each of the sample activities in Table 2 requires multiple lessons over a period of weeks to produce quality movement by many children. The curricular time often used for low-organized games can be more productively spent in learning these prerequisite skills.

“Among the key tasks of early childhood educators is supporting children's developing sense of self” (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p. 116). Facilitating the preschooler’s emotional development in movement requires activities designed for controlling one’s own body, mainly in balance and locomotion, and to some extent, manipulation of appropriate equipment in appropriate activities.

The development of self-esteem for children ages five through eight is vitally important and tied very closely to social competence. A sense of mastery or competence is a major aspect of social-emotional development for children in the primary grades (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In this regard, continued emphasis on basic movement skills and combinations of these skills is needed for most children. The developmental approach gears instruction to mastery of movement skills in individual, partner, and small-group settings. Inherent in this instruction are activities designed for successful skill development that promotes social and emotional development. Thus, switching the emphasis from low-organized games to skill acquisition and mastery has many benefits.

Summary

For very young children, ages three through about eight years of age, the curricular time that has been used for low-organized and competitive games can be substituted with more developmentally appropriate activities, especially for preschoolers. The stages of parallel and cooperative play require activities designed to facilitate skill development and control of one’s body, its locomotion, and basic manipulation skills.

Providing developmentally appropriate movement activities designed for individual success, self-esteem, and more control of one’s movement should be the goal in elementary school movement programs. The developmental approach, with its emphasis on learning skills and learning to move skillfully, is needed in early childhood more than the traditional, low-organized game approach.

References


National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (2000a).


National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (2000b).


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