

TEACHING SPORT SKILLS

Using the Skill-Themes Approach

By Michael Gosset

Students are not as physically active as they should be outside of school (Le Masurier & Corbin, 2006). A study by Sallis (2003) revealed that boys' decrease in physical activity (PA) was about 2.7% yearly, while girls' decrease was 7.4%. This article will describe how to teach sport skills using the skill-themes approach, an approach that may increase student interest in being physically active outside of school. Additionally, it will present the author's research on this approach, the true method of how to use it, and why it is not widely used.

The Skill-Themes Approach

It is a well-known fact that being physically active leads to improved health (McKenzie, 2003). Increasing PA time is a generally agreed-upon goal of physical education (Corbin & Pangrazi, 2003; Fairclough & Stratton, 2006; SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2017), in addition to developing skillful movers (Graham, Holt-Hale, McEwen, & Parker, 1980) and positive attitudes toward PA (SHAPE America, 2017). It is also generally recognized that the time spent in physical education class cannot in and of itself improve health and that children must be physically active outside of school (Dismore & Bailey, 2010).

So, the question begs asking: How can we increase children's PA outside of school? Children need to enjoy physical education and develop motor skill competency to be successful and ultimately desire to seek activity outside of school (Dismore & Bailey, 2010). Unfortunately, very few states mandate daily physical education in K–12 (McCullick et al., 2012). *Children Moving* (Graham et al., 1980) introduced the skill-themes approach to teaching skills in physical education by using and expanding the natural progression of Gilliom's

(1970) book, *Basic Movement Education for Children: Rationale and Teaching Units*.

It is important, for the purposes of this article, to remember that a distinction exists between themes and concepts. Movements are skill themes (or skills), and movement education concepts are the ideas used to modify or enhance the skills being taught. Examples of movement concepts include how the body moves (speed, balance, weight transfer) and where the body moves (direction, levels), just to name a couple. Examples of skill themes include striking (volleyball skills, baseball hitting, punting, etc.) and sending (throwing, hockey pass, etc.). *Children Moving* (Graham et al., 1980) referred to Schmidt's (1977) "schema theory" to state that teaching by themes is an efficient way to improve the transition from basic skills and movements to those movements that are more complex later in life. The theme focus in any given lesson *determines* the activity that is taught for that lesson.

Graham's (1980) skill-themes approach has not been the typical approach used to teach physical education in elementary schools over the years. Its use has increased, however, in recent years. For example, movement education, the foundational coursework area for skill themes, has seen an increase. Practitioners sometimes misunderstand the correct application of the skill-themes approach. In a true skill-themes approach, the key to implementation is to revisit skills numerous times throughout the school year. In other words, a lesson on a particular skill, such as striking a volleyball (e.g., forearm pass, set), might be done 8 to 10 times yearly, with several lessons in between on other skills. This revisiting allows for practicing the skill and for the integration of other skills.

Revisiting with integration is known to veterans of the skill-themes approach as the "spiral." An example of spiraling may be a lesson on dribbling a basketball in a stationary fashion, followed by lessons on several other skills, one of which might be learning the leap (locomotor skill, track and field, dance). Returning to the basketball example, dribbling while traveling (e.g., walking or running) might be taught as the lesson focus.

Once again, several nonbasketball lessons may be taught next. Ultimately, the lay-up skill is taught, integrating the dribbling while traveling with the leap, which would have been previously taught.

Student Attitudes toward Physical Education

Gosset (2015) studied upper-elementary student attitudes toward physical education in two different approaches, namely the skill-themes approach and the multiactivity approach. The intent of the multiactivity model is to expose students to a variety of sports (Himberg, Hutchinson, & Roussell, 2003). A teacher-centered approach, the multiactivity model involves sports taught in short units in essentially the same fashion each year. Much gameplay takes place, and competition is integrated. Because there is more gameplay, instructional time is limited (Hart, 2006).

While using a guide to assist in categorizing school physical education programs into one of the two curricular approaches, Gosset (2015) found that teachers sometimes stated they were using the skill-themes approach. Gosset found, however, that on occasions of observation and documentation, teachers were using the more traditional multiactivity approach.

This study (Gosset, 2015) further revealed that although the overall averages of the school means in the two approaches were nearly identical, the range of attitude scores between the approaches was different. The means at the schools where physical education programs were categorized as using the skill-themes

approach had a narrower range than the means at those schools where the programs were categorized as multiactivity programs. It can be interpreted that the students' attitudes toward PE in the schools using the skill-themes approach were more consistent than those in the schools using the multiactivity approach. Both the skill-themes and multiactivity approaches had some schools with high student attitude scores. The number of schools with lower student attitude scores, however, was more limited in the skill-themes approach than in the multiactivity approach. The skill-themes approach was apparently appealing to more students.

One objective of physical education is to “turn on” all students to PA. The intent of the study was to investigate student attitudes toward physical education in the hopes of illuminating the benefits of using the skill-themes approach. When the skill-themes approach is used appropriately — that is, with frequent revisiting of a given skill over time and with appropriate progressions to increase complexity — children may increase their skill competency. As a result, their desire to find PA opportunities outside of school may increase, which may ultimately lead to an increase in overall student health.

Problems and Suggestions for Using the Skill-Themes Approach

So, why do physical education practitioners not use this approach more? One reason may be practicality. Facilities and scheduling often dictate lesson planning. With thought-



ful planning, however, anything is possible. The teacher must sometimes be willing to put in extra effort for a short time to set up a lesson — for example, when the space is used for a different grade level or lesson before or after the targeted lesson or when another teacher has a different lesson before or after the targeted lesson.

Teacher preparation is also a possible reason. Methods courses in most professional preparation programs include methods of elementary physical education. These methods classes introduce students to multiple methodologies and approaches. Very few universities offer a skill-themes course at the undergraduate level. Some universities, such as State University of New York Cortland (n.d.) in New York and Winthrop University (n.d.) in South Carolina, include courses as requirements. Cortland requires the Movement Education course, the “prerequisite” for skill themes, while Winthrop University has a required Movement Education and Skill Themes course. A standalone skill-themes course as a requirement would provide students with the in-depth rationale for the approach and significant lesson planning for its use. Without this in-depth study of skill themes, teacher candidates are hard-pressed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the approach or of how to appropriately utilize it.

Looking Forward

The elementary physical education progression from movement education to the use of the skill-themes approach can be found in several schools throughout the United States. Remembering to stay true to its intended manner of implementation (i.e., frequent revisiting of skills) might increase the number of students interested in seeking PA outside of school. If students increase their PA outside of school, they may improve their health in the long term.

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