Implementing a Tactical Games Approach with Sport Education

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Implementing a Tactical Games Approach with Sport Education

A Chronicle

KLARA GUBACS-COLLINS  EDWARD B. OLESEN

This hands-on account offers practical advice gained from experience.

The main purpose of this article is to discuss the challenges encountered by a middle school practitioner over a five-year period when implementing the tactical games approach (TGA) within the sport education model (SEM). Included are genuine quotes (extracted from video tapes and written records) from the students, the principal at the practitioner’s school, a guidance counselor, the child study team, and a parent whose child was exposed to the models. By presenting a practitioner’s chronicle of experiences, this article seeks to give a “hands-on” answer to the question “Do these models work and can they be combined?” It is hoped that this information will assist K-12 instructors in their own implementation of these models.

The Models Present Challenges

Since the introduction of these models more than a decade ago, resources have been developed to assist practitioners in implementing both the SEM (Siedentop, 1994, 1998; Siedentop, Hastie, & van der Mars, 2004) and the TGA (Griffin, Mitchell, & Oslin, 1997; Mitchell, Oslin, & Griffin, 2006). Yet, despite the widespread dissemination of these materials, neither of these models has become the standard used at the K-12 level today. Even fewer schools have successfully integrated the TGA within the SEM (for a recent proposal to combine them, see Pritchard & McCollum, 2009). The resistance to these models may be due to a variety of reasons, including (1) the controversy surrounding the practicality of these models in a culturally diverse and changing physical education environment; (2) the concern about the benefits for students with and without special needs; (3) the continued emphasis on traditional approaches in physical education teacher education (PETE) programs; (4) teachers’ lack of content knowledge; (5) the “advanced instructional skills and deep understanding of activities” needed by teachers (Launder, 2001, p. 13); and (6) the instructors’ lack of “a thorough practical knowledge of a wide range of games and a willingness to set up small sided games to create learning laboratories where questions could be asked and practical solutions sought” (Almond, 2000, personal communication as cited in Launder, 2001, p. 12). This article addresses many of these concerns.

The Middle School Program

Brian (the second author of this article) was a nontenured, first-year middle school teacher in a middle- to upper-class suburban community in central New Jersey.
The physical education department at Brian’s middle school consists of five health and physical education instructors. During a regular week, physical education classes are taught in two gymnasiums by three physical education teachers in the same time slot. Each class period lasts 50 minutes. Every day Brian teaches four physical education classes in grades six through eight and one sixth-grade health class. The students have physical education every other day.

Before Brian’s employment at his middle school, the physical education program that was offered to students represented a technique approach and a variation of the multiactivity model. For example, the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students received six lessons on an activity, rotating between three activities in each marking period, with each marking period totaling about 18 lessons. The students received the same activities from grades six to eight. After using both models for several months, Brian discovered that this system was inadequate for achieving the standard of learning he expected from his students. In his search for answers, Brian turned to his local state convention, where he attended a professional development workshop on the TGA and SEM, given by a university PETE professor (this article’s first author). A collaboration and mentorship ensued between Brian and the PETE professor, which served as the foundation of Brian’s implementation efforts.

**Description of a Tactical Games Approach**

The TGA originated from the teaching games for understanding model, therefore the framework of the TGA emphasizes the learning of movement forms (skills) within the game context, as opposed to the technique approach in which the skills are practiced in isolation. The practice of isolated skills has caused many students in the past to struggle with transferring skills learned in drills to a game environment (Griffin &(415,630),(561,663)

However, when the TGA is administered, students are able to immediately see the relevance of a skill within the context of game or practice situations (Mitchell et al., 2006). This is due to the fact that students are immersed in a carefully crafted, conditioned game that accentuates on-the-ball skills, off-the-ball movement, and decision-making skills. This is accomplished by adhering to a unique lesson sequence: (1) initial game, (2) question-answer session, (3) practice task, and (4) final game.

**Implementing a Tactical Games Approach**

Upon Brian’s return from the convention, he attempted to implement the lesson sequence of the TGA in his volleyball unit with sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students. Approximately 200 students were exposed to this new model. In the initial phases of introducing the model to his students, Brian found obstacles that are not often discussed in seminars. Some of them include classroom management, inadequate facilities, team teaching, large class numbers, and motivating students to participate in vigorous physical activity.

**Classroom Management.** As Brian began to administer the TGA the first time, he found classroom management to be challenging, especially when transitioning large groups of students quickly from one lesson segment to another without losing precious academic learning time. In an effort to rectify this problem, Brian started to organize teams earlier in the unit, use the initial game as the warm up, provide three to five minutes for the initial game, allot two minutes to the question-answer segment, provide 10 minutes to the practice task, and allocate 12 minutes for the final game. Brian instantly felt the positive effects of these changes. Also, as the students became more familiar with his lesson format, the time off task, lost to transitions, decreased significantly.

**Facilities.** In most middle schools, space is always a reason for concern. This was not any different in Brian’s case when he taught a volleyball unit. His share of the facility was half a gym (two volleyball nets) in a space 36 feet wide by 51 feet long. Brian chose to divide the courts in half (long and narrow) and developed eight teams of four students each. Despite the confined space, he was still able to use the lesson format outlined by the model.

**Team Teaching.** In middle schools across the United States, team teaching is quite common. This is especially apparent in physical education, where gymnasium space is often limited. Regardless of logistical difficulties, Brian proceeded to implement the model in his first two volleyball lessons. Brian wrote in his journal after teaching a lesson one day,

> My students thoroughly enjoyed the model because they received an opportunity to experience the excitement of game play on the very first lesson. In order to critically evaluate their interests and thoughts, I concluded my lesson a few minutes early in order to solicit feedback from the students.

For example, I asked, ‘Which approach did you prefer: today’s approach to learning the game of volleyball or do you prefer the other approach that we used in soccer and tennis?’ Unanimously, the students favored the tactical approach over the technique approach. Then I asked the students, ‘What was different about the lesson? Why did you like it?’ One student responded by saying, ‘We got to use our skills today in the game.’ Another student responded, ‘Now I understand why we use the skills in the game.’ Still another student said, ‘It is a lot more fun and you learn how to play the sport better.’

As a result of the students’ responses, Brian knew he had a golden opportunity to lead the department in a completely new direction.

Unfortunately, physical education teachers are not always willing to try something new in their classes. Potential reasons may include, limited equipment and space, conflicting philosophies during team-teaching situations, tenured status, climate and culture of the learning environment, and other informal pressures and demands within the department. For example, two teachers may be asked to work together to teach the same lesson to their students even though both have dif-
Brian implemented the combination of the tactical games approach and sport education in a number of units, including flag football, seen here.

different teaching philosophies. This occurred with Brian after introducing the TGA in his first two lessons. Teaching the remaining volleyball unit with a veteran teacher who was grounded in the technique approach presented a challenge to both teachers. Fortunately, they were able to reconcile their professional differences through an open, honest, and flexible relationship. The veteran teacher agreed to allow Brian to be the lead teacher during some periods and to implement the TGA. The veteran teacher also agreed to assume a supportive role in his lesson. In return, Brian gladly relinquished authority as the lead teacher in other joint activities. Just like his colleague, Brian assumed a supportive role in assisting the veteran teacher in delivering a technical lesson. As for the students, they were able to adapt to both styles of instruction, although they privately continued to express a preference for the TGA.

Motivation and Enjoyment. During the course of a school day, Brian’s students attend several different classes in which they are required to read, write, and perform arithmetic problems. In addition, they often sit and process information for long periods of time without a break. In fact, they receive 100 minutes of language arts instruction per day. Consequently, students are always excited to enter physical education class with the hope of playing a game from the start. Brian understood this motivation more after each class and decided to use it to his advantage when implementing the TGA. For example, when it was his turn to be the lead teacher again, he started and ended each volleyball lesson with a tactically driven “game.” As a result, the students developed a better appreciation for the game and, most important, they had fun while learning.

As Brian’s first year of teaching came to a close, he implemented the TGA in more of his classes in order to assess the students’ preferred learning styles. Based on student feedback, Brian felt that this approach was moving the teaching-learning process in a direction that was more conducive to student achievement.

In Brian’s second year of teaching, he focused on solidifying his knowledge and understanding of the theory, research, and practice of the TGA. This was accomplished by implementing the model in every unit offered during the course of the academic year. These units included soccer, tennis, flag football, lacrosse, softball, and badminton. He did not use the game classification system because of the limited facilities and equipment and the number of students scheduled for each time slot. However, the lesson content development became easier after teaching several different invasion, net/wall, and striking/fielding games.

In Brian’s third year, he had finally become a confident tactical teacher. He became aware of the subtle nuances and inner workings of the model. However, this did not come without significant devotion, passion, and sacrifice. It was a fun experience, and a research interest was developed for the field of physical education. Brian knew more work would be needed if the program were to continue forward. Although the TGA was used within the multiactivity model, the two models did not work well with one another because their philosophical underpinnings were on opposite ends of the spectrum. As a result, Brian shifted his focus toward implementing the SEM in the beginning of his fourth year of teaching in order to provide a more consistent and coherent approach to middle school curricula.

Description of the SEM

The SEM is directed to “provide authentic, educationally rich sport experiences for girls and boys in the context of school physical education” (Siedentop, 1998, p. 18). Furthermore, the SEM has the primary goal of educating students to be competent, literate, and enthusiastic sportspersons (Siedentop, 1994). In order to accomplish this, physical educators must extend the length of the basic instructional unit to a “season”; use a combination of teaching styles including direct instruction, cooperative learning, and peer teaching; provide multiple and authentic opportunities for skill and strategy practice, application, and assessment; and increase student responsibility by immersing them in the culture and roles associated with a particular sport (Siedentop, 1994, 1998).

The suggested curricular and instructional revisions include the application of six key features that define what it means to participate in an authentic sport experience: (1) the use of extended seasons, (2) team affiliation, (3) formal competition, (4) culminating events, (5) record keeping, and (6) festivity (Siedentop et al., 2004). In the SEM, students are affiliated with a single team for the entire season. Within each team, every student has a playing role and a nonplaying role that exists in authentic sports, such as coach, manager, statistician, equipment specialist, and athletic trainer. During the “season,” which can vary in length from three or four weeks to nine or ten weeks (10 to 20 lessons) depending on student age, student interest, facilities, and
the school schedule, the team is given time to practice skills and compete in a formal league setting against other teams. The competition concludes with a culminating event that determines the most accomplished team for that particular season (Siedentop, 1998).

Implementing Sport Education

Brian began his fourth year of teaching middle school by implementing the SEM in order to provide his students with an authentic, positive, and developmentally appropriate sport experience. His first step was to rebuild the activity schedule so the students could have longer “seasons.” Thus, Brian and his colleagues decided to collaborate in developing a two-year schedule that rotated various fitness regimens and games as a means to avoid repetition at each grade level. For example, in the fall of year one, students learn soccer, flag football, and tennis. In the fall of year two, students receive instruction in speedball, flag rugby, and badminton. Since there are three classes in one timeslot and only two gymnasiums, the classes rotate among three activities. These activities are extended beyond the marking-period deadlines to allow for additional lessons. Students are assessed and given letter grades based on the activities they have completed within the marking-period timeline. For example, if the marking period ends in the middle of a sport, then that activity gets counted toward the next marking period’s grade. This schedule follows a similar format in the winter and spring months. Overall, some of Brian’s colleagues prefer this schedule because it builds in time for trips, assemblies, and professional development days.

Brian’s second step in administering the model was to introduce his classes to the concept of team contracts. Team contracts are useful for teaching students about the nonplaying roles of sport. Also, contracts are helpful in allowing seasons to run more smoothly and efficiently. For example, Brian was able to successfully organize the teams early in his first soccer season so students could practice skills and strategies together, turn to one another for support, and develop a level of camaraderie and trust. Siedentop et al. (2004) states, “…persisting membership on a team…create[s] situations in which responsibility and personal growth can take place” (p. 49). As for team selection, a blind draft was conducted by the teacher and students to ensure that talent was evenly dispersed among the various teams. A blind draft consists of the teacher selecting four to six students to be coaches, thus creating four to six teams. Next, the teacher distributes a class list to each coach. During lunch, they sit together and draft a team in a round-robin fashion. The catch, however, is that the student coaches are not aware of which team the teacher is going to place them on, which serves as an incentive to distribute teammates evenly, thus creating an equal “playing field” among all constituents (Siedentop et al., 2004).

Once the blind draft was conducted, Brian’s third step was to incorporate a thematic approach into the season as a strategy to integrate academic goals within physical education. This is especially important in a time when accountability and standardized testing are a constant element of schooling. For example, during the soccer unit, Brian introduced World Cup Soccer by listing all the countries who qualified for the 2006 World Cup Games. Students were required to choose a country on the first day of the season and to research their country and provide interesting facts to the class. To use “across the curriculum” strategies, Brian encouraged the scorekeeper for each team to maintain the score in their country’s language. If they were successful in correctly pronouncing the score at the conclusion of the game, then his or her team would receive an additional goal. This proved to be advantageous for some teams who needed an extra goal in the playoffs. Overall, the students responded favorably to this part of the season.

In the fourth step of implementing the SEM, Brian divided the soccer season into three sections: (1) preseason, (2) regular season, and (3) postseason (i.e., championship game). The entire season was based on a total of 10 lessons. For example, he devoted four lessons to the preseason, (i.e., tactical instruction), two lessons to the regular season, (i.e., team drills, fitness), and four lessons to the tournament, (i.e., playoffs).

Brian’s fifth step in introducing the model was to develop a refined league scoring system (table 1). Because the team contracts were insufficient in holding the students responsible for their playing and nonplaying roles, the scoring system was designed to establish stronger accountability for their personal and social responsibility (Hellison, 2003). The system is set up so that the “best team” is not selected solely based on whether it won or lost a game; other factors are taken into account. One common criticism of the SEM is that it places too much emphasis on which team wins or loses games, to the exclusion of other desirable goals in the lesson. The type of league scoring system applied by Brian, however, is an example of how the SEM can be differentiated from interscholastic athletics and formalized club teams.

The final step for Brian in implementing the SEM was to design an appropriate competition format that included individual and team awards. The competition format used in World Cup Soccer consisted of a round-robin tournament in which each team had the opportunity to play, regardless of their league standing. On the final day of the season, Brian distributed awards to all students who exemplified excellent play, leadership, and “sportspersonship.” Collier (2005) suggests that “highlighting certain rituals, such as a coin flip... or structuring the warm-up for tournament play so that it emulates Olympic volleyball, enriches the student experience...these types of festivities...represent a more inclusive form of sport that goes beyond the focus of performing on the field or court” (p. 144).

Students were aware from the beginning of the requirements leading to awards, which motivated them to work hard throughout the season. Students whose psychomotor ability was their strength were able to be recognized by their peers. This is particularly important to middle school students because much of their self-esteem is based on how their peers...
Table 1. League Scoring System Formulas

Preseason and Regular Season Formula

**Application:** This formula is used to determine the first and second seeds, who receive a bye in the first or second round of the playoffs.

**Description:** List each characteristic in a column with the maximum point value in parentheses. For example, equipment points (3) + skill points (3) + personal and social responsibility points (4) + points score (unlimited) + warm-up points (3) + drills (3) + wins (5) + ties (2) = seed number (i.e., highest total is first seed).

**Note:** During the preseason, the teacher should assess only the following columns per game: equipment, skill, and personal and social responsibility. During the regular season, the teacher should assess only the following columns per game: equipment, personal and social responsibility, drills, wins, and ties.

Postseason Formula

**Application:** The overall champion is the team with the highest total score from the following three columns.

**Bonus Column:** Worth up to 3 points. Ratings are “superior” (3 points), “good” (2 points), or “needs improvement” (1 point). Ratings are given on the basis of equipment set-up, skill, warm-ups, drills, strategy, tactics, team roles, and points scored.

**Personal and Social Responsibility Column:** Worth up to 4 points per game. Based on Hellison (2003), points are awarded for achieving one of the following levels: leadership (4 points), self-direction (3 points), participation/effort (2 points), and respect (1 point). For example, if team “A” demonstrated leadership while playing team “B,” they would receive 4 points for that game. However, their personal and social responsibility points may change from game to game.

**Win Column:** Worth 5 points for each game won.

perceive them. Furthermore, the nonplaying roles associated with World Cup Soccer allowed other students to use their talents, such as mathematics in scorekeeping or leadership skills in coaching. So these students had an opportunity to shine as well. In retrospect, Brian found this curriculum to be an excellent way of creating a positive, meaningful, and stimulating environment for all students.

**Combining the SEM and TGA**

Collier (2005) has stated, “...my experience with beginning teachers suggests that implementing SEM and TGM [i.e., TGA] separately before considering them as partners on an integrated team may be helpful” (p. 146). However, based on his experience using these models over a four-year period, Brian believes that novice teachers should learn the TGA and SEM together and implement them concurrently, rather than in isolation. Brian states,

The SEM’s primary features provide beginning teachers with the classroom management and organizational structure necessary to implement the TGA. For example, the use of seasons, diverse roles, various competition formats, and record keeping (formative/summative assessments) are vital to shaping the delivery of the TGA. All too often, student teachers and new teachers lack these prerequisite skill-sets.

Brian goes on to say, “The SEM also assists teachers in overcoming one of the most challenging managerial aspects of the TGA, which is transitioning large groups of students among the different lesson sequences without loosing precious academic learning time.” He believes this can be accomplished by implementing sport education on the first day of the season, so that the logistics are set in place for subsequent lessons. In other words, the teacher does not have to devote additional instructional time reselecting teams, communicating field locations, choosing team colors and roles, or explaining equipment distribution procedures.

Another formidable impediment to implementing the TGA pertains to the teacher’s level of content knowledge. Beginning teachers tend to have difficulty highlighting the primary and secondary rules of the initial and closing games so that the on-the-ball skills, off-the-ball movements, and decision-makings skills are properly emphasized in the lesson. Brian believes this can be overcome by studying chapter five in Siedentop et al. (2004). In this chapter, the authors discuss key strategies for (1) modifying games, (2) modifying individual sports, (3) modifying team sports, (4) including students with disabilities, and (5) creating a modified sports, games, and activities curriculum. Through intense study of this chapter, beginning teachers can gain much of the background knowledge needed to modify or condition games.

It is not uncommon for teachers new at the SEM and TGA to hesitate in embracing the models due to their student-centered approaches, organized chaotic environments, and increased content-knowledge requirements. Changing methods can be intimidating and viewed as an insurmountable task. Nevertheless, it can be done if teachers read and study the theory, research, and practical applications behind the models first. Once teachers develop a strong working knowledge of the models, the second step is to implement them simultaneously with the SEM serving as the curriculum framework and the TGA functioning as the dominant
teaching methodology. Although much debate surrounds the TGA as a curriculum model, Brian believes it serves best as a teaching methodology. The third step for teachers is to study a sport or activity in great depth, so it can be modified to meet the developmental levels of all students. One of Siedentop’s perennial concerns regarding physical educators on all levels is their lack of content knowledge relating to sports and exercise. Once the physical educator has developed a strong working knowledge in a sport, the fourth step is to apply that knowledge through the use of the models. The final step, and probably a vital one in this transformation process, is for teachers to keep a detailed log of lesson modifications and ideas that worked and did not work during the season. This will help teachers to avoid the same mistakes in future activities.

Responses to the Innovations
In an effort to substantiate the benefits of implementing the TGA within the SEM, Brian informally interviewed eight middle school students from seventh and eighth grade who were exposed to both models. The students were chosen based on different interests, ability levels, gender, and previous exposure to various teaching and coaching methods in sport and physical education. Only two students are used below as examples, but all had similar perspectives. Brian also interviewed the principal, the guidance counselor, the child study team, and a parent whose child was exposed to these models. Their responses also follow below.

Game Performance. One of the most important rationales for using the TGA is to support students in developing their game performance. Some students specifically noted the importance of game-like practice conditions for improving game performance. Michael, a seventh-grader, stated, “Drills are much more game-like. Many unexpected situations occur, and a player must quickly react.” He added that “the drills in the [TGA] are more challenging and require more awareness.”

Seasons Versus Units. All students preferred seasons as units and offered several reasons for their preference. Comments indicated that in the multiactivity model, they were being rushed when playing a sport. Students suggested the need for longer units that would enable them to gain a more in-depth understanding of each sport. Catherine, a seventh-grader, stated, “I like using seasons as units rather than traditional units because there is a lot more time to do more activities. You can fit a lot more into seasons of playing a sport than just having six classes of that event. She continued, “Learning skills for three days then scrimmaging for three days can be boring.”

Principal. “From an administrative perspective, I initially had some reservations regarding the implementation of a tactical games approach,” stated the school principal. He continued,

This is due to the lack of safety associated with permitting students to engage in competition without receiving any prior instruction on the skills. Once I discussed this issue with Brian, I realized safety is addressed on the first day of the unit and reinforced before the start of each ‘initial game.’ Therefore, I believe both a tactical games approach and the sport education model are beneficial in teaching our students sports and games.

Guidance Counselor. “At last an approach to physical education that addresses the needs of all students, and not just the needs of the students identified as the ‘jocks!’” exclaimed the school guidance counselor, who was also enthusiastic about the results of implementing the new model. The guidance counselor continued,

Today academic courses emphasize higher-level thinking skills and problem-solving skills. The tactical games approach of-
fers primary opportunities to emphasize these cognitive abilities too. Fewer students than ever before came to me complaining of having to participate during the physical education units where this technique is used. More students have voiced to me their confidence in their ability to perform successfully and contribute to their teams under this teaching method than during the units where the technical approach is used. And our special education students have fun too, as they contribute to the overall success of their teams and are cheered on by their peers for doing so.

Child Study Team. “Special needs students benefit from instructional approaches that include multisensory, kinaesthetic, and tactile activities,” commented the child study team. “The tactical games approach and sport education model can be modified to successfully address the individual needs of the student. This approach has provided our special needs students with a positive, inclusive physical education experience.”

Parent. Even parents perceived the benefits of the model. One parent said,

As a parent of children at different skill and age levels, I can truly appreciate the benefits of the sports education model and the tactical games approach. Physical education has had a different impact on my current middle school child as compared to his older brothers. He thoroughly enjoys his participation in physical education. It has become a ‘fun’ class to be in. I cannot say that my older children had the same definition of their physical education class. I particularly appreciate the benefits of the sports education model because it allows all students, regardless of their athletic ability, to participate in a game. I believe that if my older children had the experience of being part of a team in a capacity other than a game player, they might have come away with a more positive experience.

The tactical games approach would have given them a more thorough experience in a game situation as opposed to a repetition of short activities.

Conclusion
Research indicates that students’ academic learning improves when they are engaged in meaningful games and play activities (Silverman, 1993). In a physical education class, for example, students should be given an opportunity to create their own drills or set plays and explain why they think they will be effective on the field or court (Carter, 1998; Lemanson, 2000; Wolfe, 2001). In the context under review, it was clear that Brian and his students wanted a physical education experience that presented a meaningful challenge in the physical, cognitive, and affective domains. While some students “dreaded going to physical education class before” (according to one seventh-grader), once they were exposed to the TGA and the SEM, they “enjoyed going to physical education class.”

Sport education combined with the TGA has the potential to significantly improve how sports are taught within physical education programs. Many physical educators have already successfully undertaken the difficult task of designing and implementing one or both of these models in their physical education setting. The implementation of the innovative approach described in this article has proven to be a significant improvement over traditional pedagogical approaches. While vigorous empirical research needs to be completed, the preliminary indication is that the skillful implementation of the TGA combined with the SEM holds great promise at the middle school level.

References

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