‘I thought I’d hate cricket but I love it!’

Year six students’ responses to Game Sense pedagogy

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Taking an interpretive approach the research reported on in this paper sought to provide deep insight into year six students’ experiences of Game Sense and inquire into its capacity to promote more positive attitudes toward sport. Focused on the ‘least sporty’ students in a year six primary school class, the research used students’ drawings of their experiences to generate meaningful dialogue and provide insight into their experiences of cricket and softball taught using a Game Sense approach. The study showed significant improvement in attitudes toward cricket and softball, in social relationships within the class, and in general behaviour in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

PUBLIC panic over childhood obesity and lifestyle diseases such as type II diabetes has drawn attention to the importance of regular physical activity in the lives of children and young people. In response the promotion of physically active lifestyles forms one of the primary aims of physical education programmes in Australian schools. Certainly, engaging children in regular and appropriate physical activity at school has the capacity to make an important contribution toward the development of physically active lifestyles. However, fostering long-lasting attachment to physical activity outside school, and beyond the school
years, presents a more complex and challenging task that needs to begin with making physical activity both enjoyable and meaningful for children and young people. This means that this is only likely to occur if the attitudes to physical activity developed in school are positive and relevant to the interests of students (Shropshire, Carroll & Yim, 1997). Educational institutions have long understood the connection between physical activity and health in physical education programmes, but significant social changes and changes in the meaning and practice of education over the past few decades have seen physical education struggle to show its relevance in the curriculum and to make learning relevant and inclusive for a wide range of students (Ennis, 1999). Despite changes in physical education curricula in Australia that seek to widen the range of physical activity offered in physical education programmes sport and games continue to form very significant components in physical education programmes. Sport forms a prominent feature of Australian cultural life and, with a highly developed system of community-based clubs, sport offers an accessible form of physical activity that also has a strong social dimension. When taught appropriately, whether at school or in clubs, sport is also an activity that offers a wide range of positive social, cultural and personal learning. However, as much research in the physical education literature suggests, traditional approaches to teaching sport and games that focus on the drilling of technique exclude the less capable, the less physically confident and those who do not come to classes with positive inclinations toward sport (Ennis, 1999; Light & Fawns, 2001).

There is need for approaches to teaching and coaching children and young people that are inclusive and which provide enjoyable learning experiences for all students and not just the physically skilled (Ennis, 1999; Benjamin, 2001). However, traditional approaches to teaching games and sport tend to highlight what many students cannot do to exclude them from enjoyable and meaningful experiences of games and sport. Recent alternatives to this ‘technical’ approach that base all learning in games such as TGfU (Teaching Games for Understanding), Game Sense (an Australian variation), Play Practice (Launder, 2001) and Sport for Peace (Ennis 1999) offer teachers approaches that make learning enjoyable, meaningful and inclusive (for example see, Light, 2003; Pope, 2005). While there has been a marked growth in research on these ‘understanding’ approaches, most of it has focused on improvement in game play performance and more recently, on teacher education and development (for example see, Brooker, Kirk & Braiuka, 2000; Butler, 1996, 2005; Light, 2002; Light & Butler 2005). There also has been interest in the ways in which these approaches highlight the intellectual dimensions of games and develop higher order thinking (for example see, Howarth, 2000; Light & Fawns, 2001, 2003) but, with some notable exceptions, comparatively little research has been conducted on children and their affective responses to understanding approaches such as TGfU and Game Sense (for example see, Light, 2003; Pope, 2005).

In setting out to redress this oversight in the literature this study inquires into year six students’ responses to a unit of cricket and softball taught using a Game Sense approach. It examined the capacity of Game Sense to encourage more positive attitudes toward sport. Conducted in a year six class and focused on the ‘less-sporty’ students it sought to answer the question: Can the Game Sense approach to teaching games have a positive impact upon the inclinations of low skilled, less motivated primary school students toward sport?
Adopting an interpretive and humanistic approach it sought to interpret human experience and make sense of the impact that Game Sense pedagogy had on a group of grade six children and on their engagement in games. Focused on the social and affective aspects of learning, it employed the use of student drawings to gain insight into the inner world of students and the meaning that they make of sport taught using a Game Sense approach. In this case study Game Sense had a significant impact upon the development of better attitudes toward sport, its relevance for the key informants in the study and in the social relations within the class.

GAME SENSE

Game Sense is a variation of Bunker and Thorpe’s (1982) Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) model for games teaching, and was developed in Australia by the Australian Sports Commission and Rod Thorpe (Light, 2004). Game Sense is different to traditional approaches that focus on teaching fundamental skills before taking part in any games. Games Sense places all learning within modified games to emphasise understanding, tactical awareness, decision-making and the development of flexible, contextualised skill. This is done through the use of modified games and game-like activities that, initially, reduce the skill demands of the game so that students can concentrate on its intellectual dimensions. This usually involves beginning with simple games and building up complexity as understanding and skill develop. For example, a teacher/coach working on passing and receiving in basketball may begin with a simple game of six versus six (6V6) played in a half court in which there is no dribbling and the aim is to make six successive passes to score a point then hand the ball to the other team. In this activity players off the ball move to find space and free themselves of the defence while the ball carrier has to decide to whom he/she should pass and then where to move. The understanding and skill developed in this game could be further developed in a more complex game such as ‘key ball’. In this game players attack in one direction and aim to make a minimum number of passes (say, four) before passing to a player in the key who gets a free shot at the basket. The most important part of the teacher’s work in Game Sense is the design of appropriate learning environments. Games are presented as problems to be solved with teacher questioning guiding learning students encouraged to work collaboratively.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The site and the participants

The research was conducted at an inner-city government primary school in Sydney, Australia. It focused on a year six class for the duration of one school term. This class had 30 students (16 girls and 14 boys). The classroom teacher, Mr A., had found them a difficult group of students to teach and hoped that sport might offer a way to address some of the problems he was having. The class was taught by the second author using a Game Sense approach for one hour per week. The classroom teacher was involved gradually in the teaching and took the last lesson on his own.
Data generation

Data were generated through all-class questionnaires, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with eight key informants, observation and student drawings. Building on the few research projects in the physical education field that have employed the use of visual data (Light & Quay, 2003; MacPhail & Kinchin, 2004), student drawings were employed as a central means of gaining insight into student experiences of sport. As Brooker and Macdonald (1999) suggest, the use of visual data and visual modes of analysis offers a means through which researchers can address concern with the lack of student voice in current research. It also offered us a means through which we could strive to enter the ‘realm of meaning’ (Geertz, 1973). A major problem with the use of drawings, however, lies in their interpretation by the researcher and their inability to adequately capture the complexity and meaning of children’s drawings (Gramrød & Staples, 1994; Wales, 1990). This study did not attempt to interpret student drawings but instead used them as a means of generating meaningful dialogue. Three times during the study the entire class was asked to make drawings that they felt captured what the cricket lessons meant to them. The eight key informants were then interviewed by the first author and asked to explain and discuss their drawing. The data were generated, not from the researchers’ interpretations of the drawings, but from the dialogue that it stimulated in the interview process. Other data were generated through questionnaires and observation. The questionnaires were completed by the entire class before and after the unit. The data analysis was conducted using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This involves an ongoing process of data generation, analysis, identification of themes and ideas leading to the development of substantive theories that are then tested and explored in further data generation.

The key informants

In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, all names used in this research are pseudonyms. Mark was a physically small boy who wanted to perform well, but sometimes could not. He was popular with a lot of students and reasonably competent at sports. Jessica was an eloquent girl, who was well rounded at most subjects, without being gifted. At the beginning of the term she didn’t involve herself much, constantly chatting and keeping her distance from the action. However, in the last few classes, she performed well, especially in fielding where she was keen to catch the ball. Emily was similar to Jessica, well balanced and bright. Katherine was tall and ‘rough-and-tumble’. She was a netball player who was not interested in other sports, and who said at her initial interview that sports did not involve thinking. Rosemary was a high achiever in maths and English who was quiet and not athletic. William was overweight and described by the teachers as a ‘non-participating’ student who was not interested in sports. Emma, an extremely tall and strong student, was shy and slow. She was embarrassed by her height and slow reaction times and said that she had always been picked last by her peers in physical education classes that involved team games. Rachel had a more positive attitude to sports, since she received a lot of encouragement from her parents, but was physically quite small which negatively affected her confidence and motivation to participate in sport.
RESULTS

1. Changes in social interaction and relationships
In the first few weeks the second author struggled with class behaviour with much bickering and arguing between the students. The problem was so marked that he could conduct questioning and reflection only at the end of each class when the students were all sitting down. Over this period the ‘less sporty’ students showed little interest in the games but within three weeks began to engage in the games, offer opinions in the post-game reflections and show interest in the results of games. They began looking for empty spaces into which to hit the ball when batting and looking to fill empty spaces and back up other fielders when fielding. As the game unfolded for them they began to think about play. Although there were occasions when they withdrew from games or had to be spoken to we noticed a gradual improvement in engagement. On one occasion when using a batting T a girl noticed that there were no fielders in close and edged the ball off the T to score runs. In the same game another girl pretended to hit the ball in one direction but then hit it in another where she had noticed there was a large gap in the field.

The students liked playing cricket and softball because they played with their friends and then while playing they also made some more friends. Mark said: “Well, we just get to know more people in our class better since some people don’t play with other classmates” (Interview, September 2, 2005). By week seven behaviour and student relations had also changed. The students became more settled and sensitive to each other. They reacted and listened and were more attentive. When asked to describe cricket, Mark said: “I describe it as a good game to play, fun, more fun when you’re having team members to have working together with each other, than arguing with them fighting over stuff, yeah” (Interview, September 2, 2005).

The students became more open to having discussions and conversations about their games and valued the learning that arose from interaction: “You learn a lot from everyone. It’s good to listen to everybody actually, it’s not fair to cut them out, it’s good to take something from everybody, cos even the people that are not really good at sports still learn strategies” (Emma, interview, September 2, 2005). When asked whether they preferred to play sports themselves or with a team, most students said they preferred playing in teams. Mark said: “I like having like teamwork, how they work together and cooperating” (Interview, September 16, 2005). Katherine said: “I think it gives you more cooperation skills and it teaches you to like, it teaches you not to be selfish: when you are playing with groups and things” (Interview, September 2, 2005).

Emily thought there was a big effect from the Game Sense classes on the relationship between girls and boys. She said: “It’s a big effect. Because, like, with the Kanga cricket, we had to be boy-girl partners, which was really good, because we could interact with boys, usually the boys wouldn’t talk to us and we won’t talk to them” (Interview, September 16, 2005).

2. Student perceptions of learning
One notable aspect of the results of this study was the difference between the observations of the teacher and the two researchers of learning and the key informants’ perceptions of their learning as drawn out in interviews. This had been a ‘difficult’ class with a host of
behavioural problems that had required some modification to teaching strategies. The second author had little success with questioning during play and decided to limit it to the end of each class when they were sitting down and settled. He had relied more on the nature of the modified games used to generate learning. From our perspective as observers we thought that the class had made reasonable progress in their ability to play cricket and softball. We also noticed a reasonable improvement in interaction and social relations within the class. However, their own views of what they learnt about playing cricket and softball, and the development of better social relations within the class, were far more marked than our view from the outside.

Research on TGfU, Game Sense and similar approaches indicates that the development of articulated knowledge occurs well ahead of knowledge expressed in action on the field. In week two some good ideas started to come from the students about fielding in the post-lesson discussion. One boy suggested that the fielding side should: “Make a close semicircle” (Field notes, September 9, 2005) to pressure the batter. One of the girls offered a different idea for the fielding side: “It is good for everyone to spread out, free space will be tighter” (Field notes, September 9, 2005). They were all thinking by this stage and most hands went up for each question. By week three, most students were able to say what tactics they should perform in games and how they should play but were not putting this understanding into action in the games. They could verbalise what they had learned about the last cricket session, but could not yet put the ideas and understandings into action in games.

The games developed in complexity over the term but the students didn’t feel that they were struggling to ‘learn’ something. As they were learning in and through games they did not view learning as something separate from the games. In their words they were just having fun in the game and saw the Game Sense approach as a ‘natural’ way of learning as William indicates: “I don’t realise it [the changing rule of the game], cos I am already having fun, so I don’t realise I’m actually thinking or like learning, I just think I am having fun” (Interview, September 16, 2005).

The more students practised in Game Sense lessons, the more they seemed to realise the importance of thinking skills as Rachael suggests: “[Thinking is] very important, if you want to win the game, just having fun, doing your best and thinking a lot. I think sports are just like as good as maths or something, because using your brain just as in sports is just the same as maths or everything” (Interview, September 16, 2005). William captured the extent to which the class gradually became aware of the intellectual aspects of games: “Like, normally we play sports that include not much thinking, but these few weeks, we’ve been playing sports that include us to think where to hit the ball, not directly up to the person” (September 16, 2005). As Rachael suggests, the student-centred nature of the Game Sense approach fostered independent, self-directed learning: “We got to think for ourselves, and we got to know the game better instead of someone just to say, the roles just go, do this, do that. It’s really good” (Interview, September 2, 2005).

3. Improved attitudes toward sport

When we informed the class that we would be teaching them cricket most of the girls were disappointed. In subsequent interviews they said that they had not been looking forward to playing cricket as it was more of a boys’ games and they knew nothing about it.
While this research was being conducted, the Ashes cricket competition between Australia and England was being contested in England. At the midpoint of the study we were surprised with the response to our question asking whether or not anyone in the class had been watching the games on television. As we expected, the keen cricketers among the boys raised their hands. We were, however, surprised to see that many girls were also watching it and this included the girls who were key informants in our study. Given that it was shown quite late at night this provided a strong indication that they were developing more positive attitudes toward cricket. In week one there had been no interest in cricket, with many girls clearly showing their dislike of it by refusing to engage in games. Yet by week seven there was great interest in the Ashes with almost two-thirds of the class saying that they had watched it.

The less-sporty students reported normally feeling nervous or anxious when they were playing sport for fear of being criticised by their team-mates for making mistakes and letting the team down. They were also ‘scared’ of being left over or last picked when teams were selected. In Game Sense there is no right and wrong action and the emphasis is on contributing ideas, so a lot of these students felt success was achievable in the cricket lessons and felt less anxious and alienated than they normally would in physical education classes: “I didn’t really feel left out, I feel more welcomed with people and as friends and stuff” (Mark, interview, September 2, 2005). All of the eight key informants said that before these Game Sense lessons they thought sports lessons were boring, but after them, they were really looking forward to new sports classes.

Yes, I always think playing sports are pretty boring, after this term with Richard and you, but I think it’s a lot of fun now. Cos I normally don’t really like sports, but after these few classes sessions, I really like it now and I look forward to whenever, like I can go. (William, interview, September 16, 2005)

In the second last week of the term, on the way back to school from playing softball in the park, the second author asked William how he felt about the lesson. William answered with surprising enthusiasm: “I really really really really really really loved it.” Then the second author asked him how he had felt about the prospect of playing cricket before the unit had started. William’s response confirms the significant change in attitudes to sport that many children in the class experienced: “No, definitely not. I thought it would be really boring. I thought I’d hate cricket. But I love it.” (Field notes, September 2 2005). Katherine’s reflection upon the term captures the extent to which the Game Sense approach had addressed the key informants’ reservations about sport, the depth of their emotional responses and the impact it had their self-esteem:

It gives me happiness to know that I can succeed in something, that I can do something. It makes me feel good sometimes. (Katherine, Interview, September 2, 2005)

DISCUSSION

In this case study Game Sense had a significant impact upon the key informants’ attitudes toward sport. It also generated significant improvement in social relations within the class
and in the students’ game play. When describing the feeling of the Game Sense classes, most students stated that “it was really fun” or “I really enjoyed it”. The experience of the students in the class and the teacher were positive enough for them to continue with the Friday morning ‘sport classes’ and for the teacher to develop his Game Sense teaching. Some recent research on Game Sense and TGIFU has also emphasised the affective dimensions of learning and the ways in which it is tied into for intellectual and physical learning (Light, 2003; Pope, 2005). The fun and enjoyment that the participants experienced during this Game Sense unit arose from their sense of achievement and, importantly, from their developing understanding of what the games were about. The Games Sense approach emphasises understanding in the form of game awareness, tactical and strategic knowledge and informed decision-making. This understanding provides students or players with a sense of the game, intellectual engagement and a means of contributing toward the team effort. Providing students with this understanding gives them a certain autonomy in that they don’t need to be told what to do but can, instead, assess the situation and make decisions themselves. They can, therefore engage in the game to develop technique as part of a whole-person learning experience.

While we suggest that the development of understanding is central to the success of this relatively brief intervention, we also wish to emphasise the importance of the affective aspects of student experience. Emotion is an integral part of people’s living and emotions fostered in students’ study can help them learn better (Heywood, 2001; Light 2003; Pope, 2005). We also wish to make clear our view of learning as a holistic process in which its various dimensions are inseparably intertwined. As Greenspan (1997) argues, teachers cannot ignore emotion or separate it from intelligence. Creating a positive and emotionally rich environment where risk and experimentation are encouraged and supported, where relationships are valued, and personal initiative and enthusiasm are cultivated, is essential for teachers to maximise the possibilities for learning (Heywood, 2001). This is also very important in making children’s experiences of sport enjoyable enough to develop life-long positive attitudes toward sport.

The social interaction stimulated by Game Sense helped the students feel needed, encouraged, and supported by their classmates. They felt that they participated in the decision-making processes of the games and that they could contribute to the team effort. Game Sense classes transformed a particularly male-dominated sport (cricket) into one enjoyed by all. The lessons started with simple, modified games that provided immediate engagement for students of all abilities and inclinations to provide opportunities for achievement and interaction. O’Reilly, Tompkins and Gallant (2001) suggest that low-organisation, modified games can stimulate student attention. With technical mastery de-emphasised, and students feeling less scrutinised and less intimidated, the less sporty students could use their ‘enabling skills’ to play the game and felt that they were able to contribute to their team’s efforts using their brains. The students’ experience of achieving ‘impossible goals’ encouraged feelings of liberation, enjoyment and empowerment.

In PE classes there are countless ties and relationships between students, both socially and physically, their teachers, the sports equipment, the space of the court as well as other variables. Game Sense places students into this relational web. Students are part of the environment and part of the game rather than acting as isolated, detemporalised and
decontextualised subjects. With the teachers’ facilitation, students are invited to approach and interpret this world for themselves. In Game Sense classes there is not any single correct way or solution to perform games (Light & Fawns, 2003). This atmosphere allows even the less skilled and less confident to contribute to the collective development of knowledge. All students are taught that there is no one who can really substitute for them in their perceptions of the world. They have to learn and explore it for themselves.

CONCLUSION

Given the relatively short-term intervention, the results of this case study are promising. Over a nine-week period, with only one, one-hour class per week, there were significant improvements in knowledge of game play developed ahead of enacted understanding. As the literature suggests is normally the case, enacted knowledge lagged well behind articulated knowledge about games and there was also a significant transfer of tactical understanding from cricket to softball for the last two lessons of the term. More noticeable for us, and the teacher, were the significant improvements in social relations and in interaction between classmates. There were still some problems and some bickering among the students but the improvement was very pleasing. From a student perspective, the improvements that they suggested had taken place were even more impressive than those that we had observed.

These were pleasing and positive outcomes of the research but the aim of the study was to explore the capacity for Game Sense to positively impact upon low-skilled, ‘non-sporty’ students’ attitudes toward sport. For the eight key participants upon whom we focused our attention, there was a significant change for the better in their attitudes toward cricket and softball. The new-found enthusiasm of the eight ‘less sporty’ children in the class for both playing and watching cricket suggests that Game Sense does offer a means through which teachers can provide enjoyable, inclusive experiences of sport that can contribute toward making sport more meaningful and a more attractive social and physical activity. Given our misgivings at the beginning of the study, the significant changes we identified are very pleasing in terms of highlighting the capacity for Game Sense to provide positive experiences of sport for children who are often marginalised by traditional approaches to teaching sport and games. The study also highlights the importance of the social dimensions of learning and teaching games, not only for learning how to play the game, but also for the range of implicit learning arising from the social interaction fostered by the Game Sense approach.

The nature of this small-scale case study limits our ability to generalise from it and larger-scale studies would certainly help in this regard, as would more similar close-focus case studies. However, the insight that this study provides into the inner world of children and their affective experiences of games confirms the capacity of Game Sense (and similar approaches) to provide meaningful experiences of the games lesson for children through adopting a student-centred, inquiry-based approach to physical education in the primary school. The immensely useful insight into the meanings that children make of sport is important for the development of sport, physical education and recreational activities for children. As Brooker and Macdonald (1999) argue, there is a need for more student voice in research on physical education and sport to provide deep understanding of children’s worlds and interpretations of experience. If we are to develop meaningful and relevant learning
experiences for children in physical education and sport that encourage positive attitudes toward sport and other physical activity, we suggest that this is an area of further inquiry.

REFERENCES


