

The Elementary Skill Theme Approach Utilizing Minimal Equipment

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The purpose of this paper is to introduce the readers to how to teach using Graham's (1980) Skill-Themes Approach, which focuses on skill themes and movement concepts, with minimal to no equipment in the elementary setting. The Skill Theme Approach describes both *content* (what is being taught) and *pedagogy* (how it is being taught). Today, many elementary physical education teachers are asked to teach large class sizes with minimal equipment. In addition to these conditions, teachers are also tasked with challenging and motivating students in movement settings where many may feel uncomfortable participating while being observed by peers. Dealing with such challenges can be daunting, but the Skill-Themes Approach provides teachers with a purposeful, less intimidating method to introducing fundamental movements and skills while providing a strong foundation for competence and confidence in many different physical activities and exercise forms encountered throughout school and beyond. In addition, such an approach allows for teacher creativity when equipment is limited. This paper highlights the four aspects of Laban's movement concepts (body, space, effort, and relationships), skill themes (locomotor, non-locomotor, and manipulative skills) and organization of activities with less-expensive equipment items such as but not limited to beanbags and tape. In addition, teachers teaching physical education, movement, physical activities, and dance are introduced to how a skill theme and movement concept approach will allow for development in less intimidating settings that focus on individual or small group tasks. Final recommendations are included to address a potential progression of activities throughout the elementary experience including combination of skills and movements, student creativity, and quality of movement. Connections can and should be made as to

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how such an approach matches well with a standards based curriculum. The paper also emphasizes 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, referred to the primary concepts of Graham's (1980) "*children moving*" and Schmidt's (1977) "*schema theory*".

Key words: skills theme approach, physical education, elementary

Introduction

Elementary physical educators are tasked with providing a foundation for the wide variety of movement activities that students will enter throughout their schooling and beyond. Despite this task, teachers face a variety of challenges that may include but are not limited to large class sizes, lack of facilities, and lack of support. In addition, department budgets for purchasing new and replacing old equipment is many times less than ideal. In the United States, according to the SHAPE of the Nation report conducted by SHAPE America (2016), the average physical education budget was \$764 per school year with the lowest average budget belonging to elementary at \$460 per year. Furthermore, only 15 states provide additional funding for physical education programs (SHAPE America, 2016). Such challenges require many teachers to be creative when attempting to deliver an appropriate curriculum for elementary students. Guided by the skill theme approach (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2013), this article will provide teaching tips to physical educators who desire to deliver developmentally appropriate content on a budget at the elementary level.

The skill theme approach is built on the premise that students need to be skillful movers, and that programs that emphasize game play over motor skill development are not improving the motor ability of students (Graham, 1987; Manross, 2000). The elements of Laban's seminal work which includes movement concepts (body, space, effort, and relationships) and skill themes (locomotor, non-locomotor, and manipulative skills) are central components in the skill theme approach (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2013). Furthermore, Schmidt's (1977) "schema theory for motor control" states the importance of children learning basic motor programs early in life to provide a foundation for adapting to different environmental or situational movement contexts. This is a major tenet of the skill theme approach. The skill theme approach is a widely used model that aims to give students competency and confidence to transition from basic skills and movements to activities and games that are more complex.

Skill themes, at their core, are defined as fundamental movements such as throwing a ball or jumping. These fundamental movement skills, at least initially, are not tied to any particular sport or

activity. These themes, in the beginning, are taught in isolation to develop the fundamental components and cues. For example, when a student is first learning to kick a ball, the teacher may only be focused on planting the opposite foot next to the ball before kicking or kicking for distance. Once the student develops the basic cues, the skill may be combined with other skills or used in increasingly complex settings such as aiming for a target or dribbling and then kicking. The four characteristics of the skill theme approach include (1) building competency in locomotor, nonmanipulative, and manipulative skills, (2) engaging in experiences appropriate to developmental levels, (3) attending to the interests of the students when determining the scope and sequence of the skill themes, and (4) ensuring instructional alignment by determining what is to be learned, practicing, and assessing the desired learning outcomes. (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2013).

The purpose of this article is to provide teachers with purposeful activities that require minimal equipment guided by the skill theme approach. It is worth noting again that age and grade level are not appropriate measures to determine content. It is necessary that teachers once again focus on the second characteristic of the skill theme approach which organizes activities that match developmental levels. The following activities listed are not meant to define the levels of skill proficiency (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2013) meaning that this article does not intend to define, provide cues, list every possible progression for walking, throwing or any other skill theme. For a description of basic skill themes and a full description of movement concepts refer to the book, *Children Moving: A Reflective Approach to Teaching Physical Education* (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2013).

The following activities will list possible skill themes (locomotor skills, nonmanipulative skills, and manipulative skills) and movement concepts (space awareness, effort, and relationship) that could be used in the activity. The students' levels of proficiency with individual skill themes will determine if it is appropriate to combine skill themes. If a student does not have the prerequisite skills to perform a skill theme, then a teacher should not expect success when combining skill themes. When ready, movement concepts such as space awareness (where the body moves), effort (how the body moves), and relationships (of body parts, with objects, and with people) (Graham, Holt/Hale, and Parker, 2013) should be incorporated to challenge students. The combining of skill themes will assist with future performance in traditional sports and activities. But, unlike many sports and activities that require certain types of equipment and space, the skill theme approach allows for teacher creativity and equipment and space flexibility. In fact, it is possible that teacher designed games, games which the teacher creates to meet the desired objective of the lesson, may be the best choice for developmentally appropriate content.

Graber and Woods (2013) define teacher-designed games as activities that a teacher creates to achieve a desired outcome such as building social skills or engaging students in moderate to vigorous

physical activity. Such activities that are new to all students may help to challenge the whole class at an appropriate level and decrease the attention placed on certain students compared to traditional sport and activity environments. As students' develop, upper elementary and middle school teachers may decide to organize units that are not guided by the skill theme approach. In preparing for this shift, it is important that teachers help students to make connections between skill themes and movement concepts used in class activities and possible future sport and physical activity participation.

Activities

Rock-Paper-Scissors Tag

Possible skill themes: Locomotor - walking, running, skipping, galloping, sliding, chasing, fleeing, and dodging; Nonmanipulative – jumping and landing,

Possible movement concepts: Space awareness-pathways-zigzag; and effort-flow-bound/free

Activity: Students will find a partner or will be paired by the teacher. On the teachers signal, each pair will play one round of rock-paper-scissors. Once there is a winner, the winner will use a locomotor movement previously stated by the teacher to flee from her partner. After completing a task assigned by the teacher, for instance, spinning around three times, the student that lost the round of rock-paper-scissors will chase the student who won using the same locomotor skill chosen by the teacher. The locomotor movement may be walking, running, skipping, or any other that the teacher desires for the students to practice in this open environment. Once the student catches his partner and softly tags her with two fingers on the shoulder or back, the students will engage in another round of rock-paper-scissors with the winner once again being the fleer and the loser being the chaser.

This activity focuses on individual skill themes previously discussed such as fleeing, chasing, and dodging. Dodging is included because the students must safely travel around the movement area without running in to others. Movement concepts such as zigzag movements and bound flow versus free flow may be discussed with students.

Cross Country Traveler

Possible skill themes: Locomotor - walking, running, skipping, galloping, sliding, hopping, leaping; Nonmanipulative – jumping and landing

Possible movement concepts: Space awareness-pathways-straight, curved, zigzag; space awareness forward-backward; space awareness-low/middle/high; effort-flow-bound/free; effort-fast/slow; relationships with people-leading/following

Activity: The teacher will have students pretend that they are going to be world travelers. Students

will be told that they are going to have to use many different movements to traverse the varied landscape. The students will be asked to safely move through the movement space without running in to classmates. The students will start their journey with a walk on a straight road then a curvy road. As the students move around, the teacher will tell them to prepare for different terrain such as rivers and dense forests. To cross the river students will leap from imaginary rock to imaginary rock. To make it through the dense forest, students will be asked to slide to fit between the trees. The teacher will mention many other scenarios and skills that will allow them to continue on their journey. The teacher may demonstrate the appropriate form for skills as a reminder.

This activity incorporates movement concepts when teachers are creative and prompt students to move across space at a low level. Or when the teacher tells students to move through the movement area in a curved motion as they travel “down the winding road.”

Possible skill theme and movement concept options include:

- Walking, jogging, skipping, galloping on winding roads
- Leaping from rock to rock
- Sliding through dense forest
- Walking at a low level to get through low caves
- Walking backward and retracing your steps because you are lost
- Hopping on one foot because of a temporarily lost shoe
- Jumping over small boulders as they roll down the hill
- Hop on a passing train (student finds a partner or is assigned a partner).

Wordy Workers

Possible skill themes: Nonmanipulative – balancing, stretching; manipulative – throwing, catching and collecting, kicking

Possible movement concepts: Space awareness-levels-low/middle/high; effort-force-strong/light; relationships-with objects-over/under, relationships-with people-partners

Activity: Students are tasked with creating teacher given or student chosen words through tossing/sliding/catching/etc. a beanbag with a partner. The students will be told to use their imagination to consider how they can form letters using manipulative skills, sending and receiving actions, with their partners. For instance, to create the letter “z” as part of the word “zap,” partner 1 may throw the beanbag with some force parallel to the ground at a high level to partner 2 who will catch the beanbag (→). Partner 2 will then throw the beanbag at a downward angle back to partner 1 who will catch it near the ground (↙). Partner 1 will then use the push pass kick to send the beanbag back to partner 2 across the ground (→) to complete the letter “z” (→ = top line) (↙ = diagonal

line) (→ = bottom line). Each pair may choose to make each letter different than other groups. Student creativity is encouraged. For instance, an “o” may be formed by partner one arching a toss to partner 2 for the top half of the circle. Then partner 2 may place the beanbag on top of her foot at a medium level and arch down and away from her body with the beanbag with a flick to partner one’s hands at the end of the movement. The teacher may want have a demonstration of a word to provide an example and spark creativity. The teacher may also ask the students to make shapes with the beanbags such as triangles or squares. Other equipment such as a ball may be used instead of a beanbag. Perhaps students are given the choice as to what object they choose to use.

To simplify the activity, the teacher may give specific commands such as, “see if you can flick the beanbag from your foot to your partner who will catch the beanbag above her head.” Or, “see if you can successfully lead your partner so that he can catch the beanbag without breaking stride.” The teacher could also ask students to be imaginative and see how many tossing and catching challenges partners can think of and perform.

Movement concepts are addressed when the teacher asks students to think about the amount of force needed to throw a beanbag in a “straight line” to a partner. Also, when creating letters, the teacher may ask students to consider levels such as high and low.

Conclusion

These teacher-designed games should start with desired lesson objectives and assessments in mind to guide content creation. Assessment of student proficiency levels in regard to skill themes allows teachers to make adjustments to activities to challenge and meet the needs of the students at their developmental level. The skill theme approach is a creative curriculum and instructional model that allows teachers to focus on the fundamental movements that will be necessary to participate in a variety of movement environments that students will encounter throughout their lifespan. It is necessary that teachers make connections between the skill themes being performed and future sport and physical activity participation (Graham, Holt/Hale, Parker, 2013). Teachers, consider how you can make this approach the guiding force behind a meaningful and fun physical education curriculum.

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