THE GAMES CONCEPT APPROACH (GCA) AS A MANDATED PRACTICE:
VIEWS OF SINGAPOREAN TEACHERS

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Abstract

This paper reports on the views of Singaporean teachers of a mandated curriculum innovation aimed at changing the nature of games pedagogy within the physical education curriculum framework in Singapore. Since its first appearance over 20 years ago, *Teaching Games for Understanding* (TGfU), as an approach to games pedagogy has gathered support around the world. Through a process of evolution TGfU now has many guises and one of the latest of these is the *Games Concept Approach* (GCA) a name given to this pedagogical approach in Singapore. As part of a major national curricular reform project the GCA was identified as the preferred method of games teaching and as a result was mandated as required professional practice within physical education teaching. To prepare teachers for the implementation phase, a training program was developed by the National Institute of Education in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and well known experts in the field from the United States. For this part of the study, 22 teachers from across Singapore were interviewed. The data were used to create three fictional narratives, a process described by Sparkes (2002a) and used more recently by Ryan (2005) in the field of literacy. The stories were framed using Foucault’s (1980/1977) notion of governmentality and Bernstein’s (1996) notion of regulative discourse. The narratives reveal tales of confusion, frustration but also of hope and enthusiasm.
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Introduction

It is over 20 years since the landmark paper by Bunker and Thorpe (1982) appeared advocating an alternative approach to games teaching and coaching. At the time it was considered to be a radical proposal given its innovative attempts to improve performance levels, encourage broader participation in games as a life long pursuit and create more equitable environments in which games take place. In spite of the inspiration and interest the paper created, Evans and Clarke (1988) sadly noted that Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) could not be described as being in wide-spread use. Only six years later, Laws (1994) argued that British school Physical Education (PE) departments who made TGfU the centre-piece of their games programmes were deluding themselves and such a commitment was akin to Sparkes’ description of innovation without change (1990).

In little more than two decades, the TGfU movement has taken on various guises in different places around the world. Examples include Griffin, Mitchell and Oslin’s (1997) Teaching of Sport Concepts and Skills in the United States, the notion of Games Sense developed by the Australian Sports Commission (den Duyn, 1997), and broadly accepted by many sports governing bodies in Australia including the Australian Rugby Union, and the Australian Football League, Launder’s (2000) notion of Play Practice in Australia, Kirk and Macdonald’s (1998) work on situated learning, and Kirk and MacPhail’s (2002) work in reconceptualizing the original model in the UK. One of the latest manifestations of the evolving TGfU movement is in Singapore where it is more commonly known as the Games Concept Approach (GCA). This is the context for this paper.
The Singapore Setting

In the space of 40 years Singapore has become a highly sophisticated modern state with a strong economy, stable government and a population adept in its post colonial technological age. Singapore’s economic success is based significantly on a hardworking population and a form of governance which has been described as a ‘controlled democracy’ (Quah, 1988). None-the-less, ever since independence the leadership of Singapore, has delivered its promises. As a consequence, Singapore has one of the world’s highest home-ownership rates (Mah, 2002); there is a highly efficient health system in addition to a national retirement benefits plan; public transport is regular and cheap; and the cost of living for ordinary families appears to be manageable within the income structure.

From the outside, Government in Singapore appears to be heavily interventionist but acts thus in the interests of a civil society. Not unexpectedly, education is core to government policy and to Singaporean life. Although in the past schools have been centrally controlled and have followed mandated curricula, a move to a more autonomous ‘critical thinking’ model is intended to invoke change. Yet, for the most part what children learn in schools and how they learn it are both subject to control. Such control manifests itself within school curricula in a number of ways and PE is no exception to such levels of control. The context of PE and sport in Singapore has been elsewhere well documented (Aplin, McNeill and Saunders, 1998; Horton, 1998, 2001; McNeill, Sproule and Horton, 2003) and specifically in the context of this curricular innovation (McNeill, Fry, Wright, Tan, Tan and Schempp, 2004; Tan and Tan, 2001; Tan, Wright, McNeill, Fry and Tan, 2002). School PE in Singapore is dominated by the discourse of corporeality specifically manifested in fitness. Schools
are rewarded on their fitness levels as assessed on the National Physical Fitness Award (NAPFA) test.

It is against this background that games education attempts to find its place in the PE programme. Not surprisingly, and perhaps unintentionally, games emerge as a poor cousin to fitness within the Singapore curriculum. Nevertheless, the move towards a critical thinking agenda by the Ministry of Education (MOE) required teachers in all curriculum areas to work towards achieving a constructivist agenda. In response, the approach for PE advocated by the Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD) and transmitted through the National Institute of Education (NIE) the sole teacher education provider in Singapore and home to the former College of Physical Education [CPE] was to draw from the problem-solving and decision-making possibilities of games and, at the same time advocate a pedagogy of games that might underpin this initiative. The pedagogic discourse (Bernstein, 1996) that emerged is called the ‘Games Concept Approach’ and is rooted in the traditions of the TGfU movement. The CPDD felt that this was the contribution PE could make to the principles enshrined in Thinking Schools, Learning Nation, an ideology that spelled out the necessity for Singapore to become a community of decision makers and problem solvers (Goh, 1997). What emerged then was a discourse grounded in mandated practice which the teaching force had somehow to accommodate. Hence for the first time anywhere in the world, the general principles which guide TGfU became mandated practice, as stated in the prescribed syllabus.

The Location and Context of the Research

In Singapore, a mandated innovation involving games education has several hurdles to overcome. First, the traditions of games playing are not embedded in the national psyche (Horton, 1998), as they are in either the United States or Australia.
There may be cultural explanations for this lack of sports consciousness, but the country’s vertical geography plays a significant role. Since independence the nation has become highly urbanised and public play-space is at a premium. This lack of recreational free range seems inconsistent with the types of games found in Singaporean schools which are central to the new syllabus. These are predominantly Western in origin (Horton, 1998).

The models of education in the independent and mission/neighbourhood schools of Singapore somewhat parallel the greater public schools and the denominational/comprehensive schools of Britain where sport (in the form of games) was included in education to produce leaders or ensure the moral compliance of the masses (Kirk, 1998). In Foucauldian terms (1979), physical education serves the Singapore aspiration of moral authority along the traditions of elitism, hardiness and/or healthiness as well as for the group compliance ethic. If the TSLN with subsequent redefinition of curriculum content was to take hold in school physical education, significant professional development would be necessary, especially within a teaching profession that had been trained to reinforce authoritarianism. In keeping with the institution’s embedded structure of line management, physical education heads of department (HODs) were invited to a three-day workshop led by American expertise to prepare for the implementation of this new approach to teaching games. The MOE’s motive was that HODs would act in a service role, return to their staff and/or school clusters and disseminate GCA content and pedagogical knowledge through workshops and departmental meetings in a cascade type model. (McNeill et al., 2004)

In 2001, the pedagogy group within Physical Education and Sports Science (PESS) at the NIE was successful in securing funding to research the implementation
of the GCA. Part of the research agenda included professional development in GCA techniques, ideologies and technologies, as well as in student teacher mentoring. This last aspect was to ensure that student teachers on practicum could be supported in their attempts to use GCA. Our paper is concerned with the views of the teachers who attended the professional development programme and who subsequently supervised a student teacher or a *trainee teacher*, a role designation reflective of the replicative social educational agenda in Singapore education.

Primarily the research team was interested to know in what ways the mentor teacher participants felt prepared to support a student teacher in a GCA practicum. Also in focus was the extent to which those teachers felt able to incorporate the GCA in their own professional practice.

*Naming and Framing*

To make sense of the data we drew upon the theoretical work of Foucault in governmentality and Bernstein’s notion of regulative discourses. These seem to offer meaningful theoretical underpinnings to better understand the views of teachers who operated within a context of mandated professional practice with evaluation that induces high degrees of self regulation. Like many institutions in Singapore, schools are panoptic microcosms, underpinned by what Foucault (1977) calls strategic compliance.

*Governmentality*

Gordon (1991) points to Foucault’s (1980/1977, 1979/1975) attempts to define government as fundamentally being about the conduct of conduct ‘that is to say, a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons’ (Gordon, 1991, p.2). Foucault himself (1980/1977) argues further that
government is not only of others but also of the self and that such self regulation follows being governed by others.

In essence Gordon (1991) says that Foucault’s notion of government is an ‘exercise in political sovereignty’ (p.3) and as such it is a human invention. Foucault’s (1980/1977) concerns are that the practice of government represents government for each and all. This is what is meant by sovereignty: seeking to both totalize and individualize. Yet at the same time, Foucault (1980/1977) seeks contentment through pastoral power usually by way of law enforcement agencies or some other policing body. In turn this security induces a sense of liberty, itself a condition of security. Liberty then can be the visage created by a government concerned with the pastoral well being of a population, but is done so through the gaze of surveillance direct or indirect. The purpose of such a visage was control or to return to Foucault’s language the ‘conduct of conduct’ (1980/1977).

Foucault (1991) argues that the task of government is to establish continuity as he says ‘in both an upwards and a downwards direction’ (p.89); that is, government should be of the self and by the self (operating within all social institutions including student cohorts, sports teams and even families) which then facilitate governance of a state. Similarly, he argues that when a state is run well, the downward effect is that individuals govern (themselves, their families and their economy) well. The two-way osmosis of governing is therefore a form of discipline of self and of others (Foucault, 1979/1975). Moreover such government is built upon ‘what is right’. In other words those who govern (and no matter in what direction), do so because they perceive it to be right and the ‘end’ of government has mutual convenience, if not necessarily benefit. Hence sovereignty becomes inseparable from convincing mutuality, control and complicity in dual-directional governance. This would appear to equalize the
dimensions of power seen as vital to maintain confidence in the circularity of obedience and the pastoral aspirations of rulers. This is especially so in ‘air-conditioned’ Singapore where through the ‘politics of comfort and control’ there is little civil unrest and a general sense that all is well (George, 2000) and that the government is ‘looking after us’ as long as we act for the government.

**Instructional and Regulative Discourses**

In an analysis of schooling, Foucault’s notions of governmentality and surveillance are useful. However there is a need for additional theoretical framing when the nature of pedagogy is central to the analysis. Bernstein (1996) provides a useful structure in his analysis of instructional and regulative discourses and suggests that we are in what he terms a *pedagogised* society. As Singh (2001) says

Bernstein contended that despite this propagation of discourses related to education, there remains a “triumphant silence” about the rules or principles generating modes of curricular knowledge and the forms of specialised interactions constituted to transmit knowledge. (p.253)

Although Bernstein (1996) (and later Singh, 2001) were referring to western societies in postmodernity, given the high priority education has been given in independent Singapore, the notion that the dominant holds sway through absence of contestation is also highly relevant here. Bernstein (1990, 1996) has consistently argued that schools have evolved to apprentice children into realms of meaning which for the most part are decontextualised from their everyday lives. In addition, schools are about the transmission of moral values, the formation of ‘particular comportments of the person’ (Singh, 2001, p.253). This, plus what might loosely be called curriculum knowledge, the abstract skills and concepts that make up syllabus-driven school knowledge (‘the instructional discourse’), is transmitted through a ‘pedagogic
discourse’ (Bernstein, 1990). Bernstein goes on to suggest that the instructional discourse is embedded in the regulative discourse which serves to transmit the moral values of schooling. According to Singh (2001), the relationship of these two sets of practice is thus: ‘Instructional discourse is the knowledge that is selected, organised, and defined in evaluative criteria, for the purposes of teaching and learning. Regulative discourse establishes the order within the instructional discourse’ (p.253). To this end, regulative discourses have a powerful governing effect on the nature of school knowledge, such as what is worth knowing, who decides how it is to be taught as who will teach it. Such discourses therefore have a significant ideological function because inherent within them are the relations of power which Singh (2001) argues control the ‘internal ordering of school knowledge’ (p.254).

Data Gathering

These data represent just part of a much larger set generated by the overall project. The overall research project generated multiple sources of data related to the implementation of the GCA in the school system and of its uses by pre-service teachers (trainees) in the practicum setting. The data sources included video footage of children, teachers and trainees, interviews with trainees, analysis of language used in GCA lessons, systematic observations of time on task and academic learning time devoted to play. Data analysis included statistical analyses for description and causality and content and theme analysis for the interview data. This was the only part of the study which sought teachers’ views on the GCA broadly and on the program of preparation for its implementation. For this aspect of the study 22 teachers across Singapore were interviewed. All teachers had taken part in a week-long training programme specifically designed to hone their mentoring skills and advance their understanding of games teaching using a conceptually-driven approach.
It is important to note that neither aspect of the in-service took priority. The mentoring part of the program was not to develop an apprenticeship model and was more aimed at a reflective approach to what has been called elsewhere clinical supervision (see Smyth 1993).

Following the mentor training, most of the teachers were identified as co-operating teachers (CTs) for student teachers (STs) from the NIE in order to better advise them on the development of the GCA. Generally each CT was matched with a ST from the NIE programme who lived close to the school. Various members of the research team, including research assistants, conducted structured interviews which lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. They were fully transcribed and analysed for themes within the previously outlined theoretical framework. This allowed for the construction of teacher stories.

Telling Tales

Representing persons is a complex business and to be just and fair is paramount (Sparkes, 2002b). This research falls into the interpretive paradigm, whereby techniques cannot be seen as guarantors of ‘truth’, but rather as interpretations of the individual within societal-cultural contexts (Bloom, 2002; Sparkes, 1992). ‘The interpretive paradigm is informed by a concern to understand the world as it is, to understand the fundamental nature of the world at the level of subjective experience’ (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p.28), in this regard interpretations must be seen as a form of social agreement between the interested parties and yet the continued involvement of all parties sometimes becomes difficult in the real world of what might at times be viewed as messy research. This was the case in this project. There was minimal member checking largely because of the very busy schedules of the teacher participants and the nature of the work day in Singapore. Because their
continued participation in the project on a regular and frequent basis was compromised, it was important that we try to ensure that all developed themes were reasonable representations of the interview data. We were guided by Geertz’s (1973) idea of thick description for the cultural interpretation of the teachers’ common pedagogical practices related to a GCA and their elicitations of that practice. To arrive at the thick description we drew upon the etic perspective as described by Merriam and Associates (2002); that is, the categorisation of the data was in accordance predominantly with the views and intentions of the lead author. Given the difficulties of continued involvement of the participants, this was inevitable.

The categorization of the data allowed for their reduction into dominant themes. We were conscious of the risks of such reductionism. In an attempt to properly represent the participants in this study we constructed three narratives, what Sparkes (2002a) calls ‘fictional representations’. We wanted to show the teachers as persons but show how the themes emerged from the data. Hence in this case such stories are composite tales drawn from the teachers’ own views of the nature of their professional world with specific reference to supporting student teachers’ using the GCA and, indeed, to using the GCA in their own professional practice. The practice of generating fiction for the purposes of research, though well established, remains controversial. Sparkes (1997) for example has used ethnographic fiction as a pedagogical process with a view to elicit responses from his students about complex social issues related to sexual identity and physical education teaching. Sparkes’ (1997) reasons for attempting this were to represent what he called the ‘absent other’. This research differs in that the participants of this study were not absent however they warranted representation in ways that were in addition to the generation of themes for analysis. The lead author took the
view that the way the teachers’ views clustered showed three ‘characters’ and at
the first level these characters seemed to speak for the group – they were
representative of the voices in the group. We acknowledge representation is
complex but were guided by Tierney (1993) who argues that a story’s validity has
to be judged on its capacity to evoke feeling, a feeling that the experience might
be authentic, believable and possible. Not wishing to abandon the reliance on data
altogether and to give the story added authenticity we chose to include voices from
the teachers matched against how they were characterised. In this sense, we have
avoided Barone’s (1995) call for what he termed emancipatory educational story
sharing in favour of a more didactic approach in search of meaning. For this we
could be criticized by authors such as Nilges (2001) for example for having
written a ‘conventional text’. However we believe that the circumstances of this
research warranted such an approach and would therefore acknowledge, if not
accept, such criticism. The practice of ‘fictional’ representation is well established
in the academic literature as already mentioned and a useful recent example can be
found in the work of Ryan (2005) from the field of literacy education.

Subramanium

Subra had been teaching for 7 years. During that time he had been at two
schools where he had also taught English. Subra’s teacher education programme was
similar to that of British physical education teachers and this is no surprise given the
previously described socio-historical context at PESS. He has remained committed to
PE but is mindful that his likely promotion route is through his second teaching
subject – English – such is the valorisation of the academic curriculum in Singapore.
When he discovered there was to be a professional development course devoted to PE
he was delighted as he felt that his subject area was being recognised. What Subra
had not anticipated was that he was going to have to re-think his approach to teaching games. Not only this, he was to find that the new approach to games under a GCA was also going to change the nature of his role as a teacher. This became one of the more taxing outcomes for Subra. He had qualified as a teacher at a time when teacher-driven instruction was the sine qua non and when discipline and docility in children were expected.

Subra attended the in-service in GCA mentoring at the NIE. As with many of his colleagues he was a little confused as to its emphasis. It seemed that it was meant to focus on the mentoring aspect so that he could have student teachers under his supervision, but felt that the main focus for him should be the GCA. He knew of the GCA because government circulars and syllabus construction had made him realize that he was going to have to come to terms with it as best he could and, moreover, was going to have to adopt such an approach to games pedagogy, as he needed to be seen implementing it. He decided that the GCA itself should be his focus, because he had after all, been taking students from NIE for around five years and felt that he was comfortable in the supervisory role. However, his problem was that when the materials were presented at the in-service workshop he found that there were multiple perspectives to what was elsewhere called *Teaching Games for Understanding*. He found this confusing but when talking to others he was not alone in this. They had experienced the same difficulty.

As a consequence he came away from the in-service not really sure whether there was a right or wrong way to go about the GCA; he was uneasy. Because the reform was a top-down
process, Subra thought that the MOE should provide more training especially as he felt that he had not, fully grasped the idea. Certainly Subra was confused about the relationship among *skill* (a term he thought he had always understood), *technique* (which he often used synonymously with skill), and *games sense or concepts*.

Subra’s confusion stemmed from seeing the essence of the GCA, the idea of developing games sense through a problem solving pedagogical approach, as potentially both advantageous and disadvantageous. He was one among many who felt that ‘skills’ (by which he meant ‘techniques’-in-action) would be compromised within a conceptual approach. It was not so much that Subra saw ‘skills’ as sacrosanct, rather it was more that he was not sure how to break his own mould, a habitus of seeking to develop some technical expertise before a game can be made meaningful. In some respects, this issue had as much to do with the notion of ‘schooling’ and the principle of control entrenched in pedagogical practices of Singaporean schools, as with Subra’s lack of professional confidence. Therefore given these complexities, and although enthusiastic about the GCA, Subra had some reservations about games as the pedagogical medium.

Moreover, in his discussions with other teachers he found that there was a further common concern. Where did this approach to games fit into Singaporean PE given the limited time devoted to games and the significant time devoted to fitness training and the preparation of children for the national fitness awards?

For many of the cooperating teachers who attended the in-service programme, learning how to use the GCA coupled with an obligation to facilitate STs’ learning to teach using the GCA was a problem.
Apparently they had to find ways to introduce a pedagogical approach to games, a content dimension largely marginalised because of the corporeal discourses that dominate school PE programmes, and find time within this part of the programme to mentor student teachers in an area to which few had been exposed. Subra, feared that opportunities for student teachers to practise the GCA would be limited by the necessities of school accountability to ‘train’ the school pupils for the NAPFA tests. As a consequence, the quality of the practicum experience might be limited and student teachers would find themselves having to conform to school agendas because so much reward was dependent on good NAPFA results. Whilst Subra was delighted to have attended a PE week-long in-service workshop as part of his compulsory 100 hours of annual professional development, he felt that many questions remained unanswered.

Tiong

Tiong had been a teacher for 12 years and believed the in-service mentoring programme was worthwhile as it affirmed and would add to his repertoire of supervision skills as a cooperating teacher. He was very positive about a professional development programme in physical education—something he felt hitherto had been conspicuous by its absence. He praised the idea that, as he saw it, PE was ‘on the agenda’ and warranted an independent professional workshop. However, Tiong was not overly committed to the idea of the GCA per se. It was not that the GCA was without use, but he was mindful that schools have the government demands in the form of statistical reporting and curriculum expectations which were more significant and ‘must be met [his emphasis]’. He felt that the attention and time needed to fulfil alternative Ministerial obligations would paradoxically limit the scope of the GCA in schools, because it was a government initiative in the first place but he regarded the
statistical agenda as paramount. He considered his thinking on this matter was consistent with that of his colleagues. As a consequence he felt that the honing of his supervision skills and methods of inducting neophyte teachers was the most useful and helpful part of the mentoring programme.

Therefore Tiong had taken on a highly technocratic view of having student teachers and felt that they served some form of apprenticeship under his tutelage. He had a custodial notion of his role in student mentoring (Lawson, 1989) and, furthermore, was mindful that there were school systems and Ministry systems and teachers, by and large, had to fit into them. Tiong showed no resentment about this although expressed that systemic needs might limit the impact of school-based curriculum development and pedagogical innovation. Tiong made no attempt to problematize these likely limitations to the effect of the GCA in-service. Tiong and many of his in-service classmates felt they had derived something similar from the mentor course: improved professional competence to pass on each one’s accumulated teacher wisdom. In Tiong’s case it belied his earlier experience with the GCA. He had been a member of the group who had been through the Ministry’s initial in-service education programme. Yet, some three years later, his grasp of the approach was still hampered by his seemingly limited understanding of the relationship between games skills and games concepts. His approach to using an understanding or conceptual method was based on the premise that all children want to play a game in PE so he used games as a regulatory device. However, his decision was not pedagogical and based on constructivist theory, rather it was about ‘going with the flow’, with the implication that, although he used games in his lesson
structure, games as a medium for developing games understanding were underdeveloped in his pedagogy.

For Tiong, the deep seated ‘skills approach’ was hard to step away from, almost as if it were a safety blanket, the ‘protective cocoon’ of which Giddens (1991) speaks. Tiong knew what he was doing: his lessons could be structured; he could control; he could monitor. He found that the long-held understandings of games pedagogy, those that he had once seen as unassailable truths and which were in keeping with a Singaporean mindset of structure, organisation and consistency, were being disrupted. For him the GCA was a challenge to his professional self and perhaps exposed his entrenched mindset of physical education and his roles of compliance and control. This could be a ‘turning-point’ (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, pp. 38-41), a juncture at which he makes a career choice regarding the habitus of his usual way of teaching games.

Anna

Anna had nine years teaching experience. She too was excited about a professional development programme with a PE focus but was specifically enthusiastic about the GCA. She believed in constructivist pedagogy and saw how the GCA represented a radical agenda for physical education teaching generally and for teaching games in particular. She felt, however, that she wanted more practical experience. Although she saw the in-service programme as essentially a ‘hands on’ experience, she had come to appreciate the theoretical underpinnings of the approach and to realise that using the GCA would enhance her teaching. Her major criticism of the workshop was its lack of opportunity for participants to teach a GCA lesson in a peer or structured teaching situation. She felt that such practice would have given her
a better working understanding of the GCA and its practicalities. In addition she argued that professional development sessions always have the most ideal conditions in terms of class size, facilities, and range of equipment. Her criticism extended to suggesting that professional development needed to be more like ‘real life’.

For Anna, the opportunity to work with a student teacher was in itself a form of professional development. She described the exchanges with her student to be productive, two-way and, in her words, ‘enlightening’. She felt that usual professional conversations foregrounded the technocratic discourses related to learning to teach, but was prepared to engage in the theoretical aspects related to teaching, specifically games teaching. In this sense she felt that she gained as much from the students coming from the NIE because she was able to ‘pass on’ in her role as a mentor. In terms of the GCA, she acknowledged the limits to her understanding and cautioned against its universal use in Singapore’s schools. As with many of her colleagues caught in a developmental discourse (Burrows, 1997), she saw the GCA as being age-specific. However further analysis would suggest that she meant ‘experience-appropriate’.

Given the perception that pupils had to be highly skilled for a teacher to use the concept approach, Anna advocated using the GCA at the mid to upper age ranges of high school. It seems that in our analysis, Anna was suggesting that the conceptual demands of the approach are too great for some children, those with ‘limited skill’. Her talk further demonstrated that while enthusiastic about GCA, Anna is confused about the relationships between ‘skill’, ‘technique’ and ‘concepts’; Anna’s dialogue also implied that ‘independent learning’ was instructional rhetoric (Sparkes, 1990) for
teachers leaving pupils to their own devices in a context where they too self-regulated.

In this misconception, Anna is consistent with many of her colleagues and seemingly the notion of constructivist means minimum teacher intervention. Such a position is paradoxical as traditionally Singaporean education has been highly teacher-centred: For Anna, and those who think similarly, there appears to be a willingness to invest in developing divergent thinking consistent with potential outcomes of problem-solving approaches currently advocated for Singaporean schools under a reform agenda, yet she is working with minimal grounded experience in how to operate that way. Her reluctance is understandable given the Ministry’s previously traditional expectations of its teachers as well as the control and docility encouraged. Interestingly Anna is able to recognise this and she is one of few, perhaps the only participant, prepared to articulate this critique, albeit haltingly.

For all this, Anna loves the mutual (and equal) exchange with the student teachers from NIE. In keeping with many of her colleagues she sees the practicum and her involvement as a cooperating teacher as a way of ‘keeping up’ with developments in the field; in other words, it is a form of professional development.

Making Sense of the Data

There are four dominant themes that are woven through all stories in this investigation. The composite narratives included here show that first there were limits
to understanding the games concept approach. Second, alternative constructions of emphasis existed for the teachers within the mentoring programme. Third, the cooperating teacher and student teacher relationship was seen as a form of professional development. Lastly, the regulative discourses framed by governmentality meant that the GCA was paradoxical in terms of the expectations of teachers in a climate of control.

Limits to Understanding

Confused readings of the GCA were most apparent among the participants when the relationships between technique, skill and games sense were discussed. In the positivistic product-driven physical education which is hegemonic in Singapore, the GCA seems to be viewed as yet another ‘teaching trick’, rather than as a radical agenda underpinned by constructivist learning theory. It does not appear that these teachers see the GCA as a problem-solving approach to learning games, yet from the government imprimatur and the core principles of teaching-for-understanding that is what it is meant to be manifest. It is, after all, a mandated practice aimed at fulfilling the Thinking Schools Learning Nation (Goh, 1997) agenda where critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making are meant to sit at the heart of the educative process. Moreover for some, it extended little beyond a behaviourist model of Sport Education (Alexander and Taggart, 1995; Siedentop, 1994; Taggart and Alexander, 1993) with a minimum of teacher intervention in games play. This key finding was not necessarily an indication of abdication of responsibility, rather it was more a lack of personal and professional experience in such pedagogy.

What also emerged from these experienced teachers added to the already confused picture projected from NIE’s student teachers which we have reported elsewhere. Teachers tended to cluster around favouring the GCA as being (i)
appropriate for teaching primary school children so that they would have the basis for technical coaching in games in high schools, or (ii) better left until some basic sports skills were in place so that then high levels of sophisticated games sense could be developed and that this did not happen until young people were of secondary school age. In all, there was no sense that the notion of teaching games through the game could be used at any or all levels. These positions can be traced to the different emphases given to the GCA/TGfU movement around the world. The teachers contributing to our research were clearly exposed to a liberal interpretation of what the GCA can represent. What is clear in this postmodern moment is that the GCA does emerge as a pedagogy in transition. In this study, teachers presented as technocratic in varying degrees and were all familiar with awards and rewards as products of the educational landscape. Yet, all appeared uneasy with the process meaning of teaching for understanding. The teacher-centred recipe, or ‘quick-fix’, that has facilitated the transmission of the skills-based model of games teaching is no longer relevant for a student-centred approach driven by intention to develop cognition and meeting the diversity of needs of contemporary youth.

It is behoven of teachers to think this process through to their own satisfaction in relation to their own particular circumstances (school culture, facilities and resources, teacher expertise). This disjunction is what is making the profession uncomfortable; for example, the GCA was initially premised on the text by Griffin et al. (1997) that provided a lesson template. A modified version of this format was intended mainly as a means for initiating the teachers into or within this new paradigm. Regrettably this format became the GCA (a product): for the teachers, it was not about teaching for understanding, it was about conforming to a template/format—in their common voice, about ‘doing it right’ [our emphasis].
Indeed, the degree of self regulation to ensure the mandated practice was seen to be ‘being done’ is significant. To make the transition to a process orientation, a not too great ‘leap of faith’ was necessary, but their confidence to commit was compromised by their confusion about interpreting the process differently either from each other or from any of the instructional team. As a consequence the teachers involved in this project, whilst interested in the notion of pedagogical change in physical education, failed to see how a different interpretation could legitimately represent an authentic constructivist pedagogy.

*Alternative Constructions of Emphasis within the In-service Programme*

It is apparent that the teachers placed different emphases on different parts of the in-service programme. Although this was linked to some confusion over the GCA, it was as much to do with what the teachers foregrounded in their day-to-day professional lives and how they ascribed importance to the different parts of the in-service programme. The teachers in this study were influenced by their perceived role as cooperating teachers and supervisory components of such a role. The teachers therefore had a strong attachment to the technocratic discourses of pedagogy that tend to dominate CT/ST relationships such as management, control and discipline--generally the prime concerns of beginning teachers. This is understandable. These would be important features of both personal and professional life. Therefore, while most teachers were happy to be doing some curriculum specific professional development work, supervision skills seem to have been given far greater importance than had been the principles of an understanding approach to games pedagogy. Given that many of these teachers had experienced a relatively low exposure to the GCA to games pedagogy, it seems strange that this aspect of the in-service programme did not attract greater importance, especially when the GCA is a mandated practice and an
The GCA as Mandated Practice

expectation of the state apparatus. In addition, within the grips of meritocracy which underpins Singaporean schooling teachers find themselves unable to relinquish the contraindicated practices which reap recognition and financial rewards in Singapore schools.

The Cooperating Teacher/Student Teacher Relationship as Professional Development

It was apparent that professional exchange between teacher and student teacher was highly valued. The teachers felt that it was a way of keeping up with the latest ideas in their subject (PE), though clearly not exclusively with specific reference to the GCA. Again the teachers were caught in their roles as cultural transmitters—further expression of the hegemonic purposes of Singapore education: teachers did see the practicum as an opportunity to ‘pass on’ ‘tricks of the trade’ in an apprenticeship-type arrangement. For the teachers much emphasis was on the discourse of management and discipline. While again this is in keeping with the Singaporean PE teaching psyche, it should be familiar to others within the physical education teacher education community. This having been said, there is no doubt that the teachers saw themselves as learners in this relationship, not experts and it would appear that ‘new’ ideas about the GCA were both welcomed and sought. This is encouraging in terms of looking for change in a traditional environment where teachers are trying to embrace new ways of operating that are potentially threatening and professionally challenging.

Regulative Discourses, Governmentality and the Paradox of Teacher Expectation

We opted to frame this paper using Bernstein/Foucault theory as we felt it offered a lens through which these fictional tales could be examined within a context of curricula and pedagogical reform and mandated practices. It was clear that there are significant expectations on teachers in terms of what to teach and how to teach it. The
GCA is a prime example. Having been identified as a possible contribution that physical education could make to the critical thinking agenda in Singapore, the Ministry mandated the GCA in its national syllabus agenda. Concomitant to this is physical education teachers’ necessary attendance at professional development programmes. There seems to be no perspective that a discovery approach to learning could be used in other content areas such as gymnastics (where such traditions have existed for at least 40 years), dance or track and field. Admittedly we did not test this hypothesis, but there is also no such directive in the national syllabus nor did teachers identify such an approach in these other dimensions of physical education. This is part of the paradox and the degree of governmentality in which teachers engage. On the one hand, they must embrace new ways of teaching games and for which additional professional development is required as part of the annual compulsory 100 hours. On the other, they are trying to reorient to a cognitive approach to teaching games against a dominant discourse of corporeality. As the teachers suggested, they have to meet the government standards for the NAPFA tests; that is, they devote a significant amount of curriculum time to fitness training (rather than to *education for fitness*), fitness monitoring and fitness measuring, or indeed to students becoming able to action informed decisions in relation to their managing their own health and/or that of others. The teachers themselves become the tools of surveillance. As a consequence, alternative approaches to games, although lauded as important, currently constitute a relatively minor item in the *real* agenda of physical education in Singapore.

Moreover, as a mandated practice, the GCA is seen as something that has to be done efficiently (‘got right’) especially because it has the government imprimatur. Yet the in-service experience of these teachers is that there is no one way to use an understanding approach to teaching games, there are many, but taking pedagogical
risks (even as low key as making a public choice to using the GCA) is not part of the Singaporean teachers’ technicist mindset.

Hence the teachers face a significant challenge. They are called upon to implement an alternative approach to games teaching and undertake related professional development and at the same time maintain the required levels of fitness and body shape in children within their schools. Their work then is framed by regulative discourses as described by Bernstein (1996) and kept in place by the panoptic gaze of colleagues (Foucault, 1977) and by Government expectations and requirements. From our understanding, no where else in the world is the TGfU, or a hybrid similar to the GCA, the expected form of pedagogy. Yet in Singapore, where there is a limited cultural capital in playing games and sports, and where games have limited curriculum time, the GCA will be done. This is part of the paradox faced by Singaporean physical education teachers and those involved in physical education teacher education.

Some Final Thoughts

It is unfair to be critical of a government initiative that is seeking to produce creative and critical thinkers for the good of a nation’s future. The Singaporean educational reform agenda is ambitious and aimed at ensuring Singapore maintains its position as a competitive nation that lives in harmony and is able to attract foreign investment through maintained social and economic growth. Moreover, it is important that all curriculum areas, especially marginalised physical education, have been charged with such a responsibility. However, TGfU is a radical agenda which seeks many outcomes in the making of competent and intelligent games players. It is as much about young people being critical consumers of games, game play and being able to make appropriate decisions about playing games at whatever level is their
need. Moreover, the possibility to use TGfU as a problem-solving device aimed at empowering young people to take responsibility for their own learning is significant. These radical ideas are, at the moment, slow to make a mark let alone be embedded in the Singaporean physical education psyche and currently at least there are limited extrinsic rewards or intrinsic motivation to make such a paradigm shift.
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Participant Voice Box #1

Participant Voice

I think the games concept approach is still a very new development. Umm, even among the presenters during the course. Each of them had a different slant to the approach. Umm, we will take I think some years for NIE trainee teachers to reap the full benefit of the training from NIE when they are in school.
Participant Voice Box #2

Participant Voice

I think if there is one strength about the GCA, it would be the emphasis on understanding the games concept. So at least, at the end of the day, pupils may not be very skilled, after the whole module of lessons ... may not be very skilled. But at least, they have a good understanding of the various games and actually be able to, err, relate the concept from one game to another. That is one strength. Er, if there is to be one ... weakness for this games concept approach would be, er, the pupils might not be as skillful after going through one module.
Participant Voice Box #3

Participant Voice

… they [pre-service teachers] must understand that fitness component is relatively important in schools. So, you cannot totally ignore the fitness component. It has to be, you know, certain sessions where the students have to, they have to run 2.4 (kilometres). They have to go through the stations of the NAPFA test because at the end of the day, it is still the NAPFA test, you know. We grade the students and schools based on the NAPFA test.
Participant Voice Box #4

*Participant Voice*

So the course gives a recognition to, err, mentor teachers that err, you know, their role is not just to guide the teachers but you’ve [we supervisors have] more say in that. So by going through the course and understanding what is required of you as a mentor so that you can help your trainee teacher. It helped me in that sense. So, errm, some of the lectures I find it very useful because it enhanced the skills that I already have.

… . I try to tell them to work with the system. There is a system in school. Every school has got a different system. The only way you can gain success is to work with the system.
Participant Voice Box # 5

*Participant Voice*

… prior to attending the course, of course, I used the old method, which is not the games concept. It is more of a skills based concept. So after going through the course, I tried out games concepts. Of course, there are certain constraints with certain classes. Some classes still, err, because their skill level is not very high, you want to spend on their skill level rather than games concept. But, err, over the years, you know, when you start any games, for example, the students always want to play a game. They don’t want to learn the skills. No matter how it is, they still want to play the game.
Participant voice box # 6

Participant Voice

...since the GCA, is a new approach, therefore, it kind of gives us a new perspective to teaching PE. So that’s for the theory. The practical side, they give us new insights as to how to approach certain games and how to use certain principles to … in a game to enlighten the students.
Participant voice box # 7

*Participant Voice*

… you can organise in such a way that they can do things on their own. And we actually with proper instructions, they can actually be left with their own sweet time. But whereas, in the other kids, you leave on their own, they will go and do their own things. In the end, they will probably just play a game and not focus on what they are then suppose to do. Yah, so I … I have been giving teenagers a more GCA approach.
Participant Voice Box # 8

*Participant Voice*

I think it takes a lot more organisation and [inaudible word] of the structure. And teachers also have to move away from the mindset of instructing because when we instruct, we actually have a lot of constraint in the class. But, erm, once we use this and a lot of independent learning and err…exploring…what the kids …what they learn…we have to…let go of a bit of control…and let kids try actually. And also…Um…teachers need to be very…Um…observant.