

## Sport Education: A Retrospective

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My purpose is to provide a personal history of the development of the curriculum and instruction model I call Sport Education, to review some theoretical and practical connections of Sport Education to other curricular and instructional models, and to explore a few issues related to the continued development of the model. I'm grateful to the Adelphi AIESEP organizers for providing me the opportunity to do this. It was at the Adelphi AIESEP Congress in 1985 that I was first able to show what the Sport Education model looked like, using sides of 5th- and 6th-grade children in a soccer season as the exemplar, so it is fitting that this personal retrospective is presented at this Congress.

### The Model

Sport Education is a curriculum and instruction model designed to provide authentic, educationally rich sport experiences for girls and boys in the context of school physical education. I will briefly review the main features of Sport Education, as they have been fully described elsewhere (Siedentop, 1994, 1998). In Sport Education, students participate in *seasons* that are often two to three times longer than typical physical education units. Students become members of teams immediately, and this *affiliation* allows students to plan, practice, and compete together, as well as benefit from all the social development opportunities that accompany membership in a persisting group. A *schedule of competition* is organized at the outset, which allows learners to practice and play within a predictable schedule of fair competition. A *culminating event* marks the end of the season and provides both the occasion to mark progress and the opportunity to celebrate successes. *Records* are kept and used for purposes of motivation, feedback, assessment, and the building of standards and traditions. The entire season is *festive* with continuous efforts made to celebrate success.

If you were an observer in a gym of a 5th grade teacher doing Sport Education volleyball, you would likely see students enter the facility for class and go in groups (teams) to one of three court spaces (home courts) where they would immediately begin to work on either a warm-up, stretching, or a series of skill drills. These would be led by a student (coach) and organized by another student (manager). The teacher would be doing last-minute preparations and interacting with students. At some point a skill or tactic practice might begin, or teams might

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be given a short period to plan for an upcoming competition. Again, organization and leadership would come primarily from the students (although if you had been there throughout the season, you would have seen the teacher helping students learn to perform their various roles).

At some point, a signal would be given to begin the day's first competition, let's say a 2 v 2 volleyball competition. Each team would have decided which team members would form the two-person teams that would compete in the name of the larger team. These competitions are often "graded" in the sense that students of comparable skill levels compete against each other. Members of two of the three teams would be sent by their managers and coaches to one of the 4 or 5 small courts where games would take place. Members of the third team, called a duty team, would be organized to referee and keep score and statistics at the various courts.

All the games would start on the same signal. They would be of reasonably short duration, perhaps with a brief "half time" for students to discuss tactics or for a substitution if there was an odd number of players that day. The game itself would be a modified version of volleyball, emphasizing basic tactics and skills relevant to a 2 v 2 situation. All games would end at the same time and there would be a short transition to allow students from the duty team to move to courts to compete in the second game, and for members of one of the initial competing teams to transition to duty team responsibilities.

Scorekeepers and statisticians would leave their sheets in an assigned place so they could all be collected at the end of class by the students from each team that had the ongoing role of team statistician. You would notice that an attractive bulletin board not only had the seasonal schedule and the day's schedule but also up-to-date team standings and statistics for all players. A third game would be played to ensure that all students both played and did duty team chores that day. A brief reflective period would end the class, most likely with the teacher recognizing students and teams that had shown tactical improvement as well as examples of fair play. This 2 v 2 competition would yield a team winner (all individual games count toward overall team points) and the class would likely move to a 3 v 3 competition where more advanced tactics and skills would be introduced. The season might culminate with a 4 v 4 competition, with an overall class winner determined by participation, competition results, and fair-play points.

This vignette shows a different mode of operation than is true of most physical education classes. Students occupy responsible roles. There is an extended season with ample opportunity to improve. Affiliation with a team (which has a name and somewhat of a uniform) creates a stronger sense of team/class membership. Competitions really mean something, giving students goals to work toward and authentic feedback about their progress.

Sport Education also differs in important ways from how sport is typically organized in children's and youth sport outside of school. In Sport Education, all students are involved equally. They all have roles to play that ensure a productive class session. They all get the same opportunity to participate and learn position play. Their performances all contribute to team success. The sports are modified to be appropriate for the skill levels and tactical competence of the students. Small-sided games are preferred because they increase opportunities to respond. While playing hard and fairly to win is stressed, the dominating ethic is to take part fairly and to improve individual and team performance. Finally, students learn more than the performer role. In each season they also learn to referee, keep score, and keep

performance statistics. Across several seasons, they will all get to be coaches, managers, team publicity directors, team trainers, and other such roles.

The goals of Sport Education are to help students become competent, literate, and enthusiastic sportspersons. I mean *competent* in the sense that they are knowledgeable games players. I mean *literate* in the sense that they understand and value sport, and can distinguish between good and bad sport practices. I mean *enthusiastic* in the sense that they participate and behave in ways that preserve, protect, and enhance sport cultures. These purposes have a strong cultural emphasis; Sport Education has always been defined as a process through which sport cultures might grow and prosper as humanizing influences in the lives of nations and their citizens.

### The History

The major conceptual underpinnings of Sport Education grew from my doctoral dissertation (Siedentop, 1968). The focus of that dissertation was a “play education” curriculum theory in which I argued that cultures of physically active play were fundamentally important to collective social life, and that bringing children and youth into contact with those cultures through educationally sound practices was sufficient to justify physical education as a school subject.

Play education theory was promulgated from 1970–1980 through three editions of my text, *Physical Education: Introductory Analysis*. It became widely known to curriculum theorists in our field. Sport Education was cited as a significant model in Jewett and Bain’s (1985) important text on curriculum, but it never came to life in a form that influenced school programs. Curriculum theories that are insufficiently adaptive to provoke and sustain programs in schools are doomed to extinction, and rightfully so. Play education never had a sufficiently substantive form to guide practice.

It is remarkable to me, however, as I reread my arguments for play education, that sport was so clearly foregrounded, yet I didn’t see it clearly enough at that time to take the next step. In that text I talked about “the development of competent tennis players—people who have learned to love what they do,” I asserted that one couldn’t “become a handball *player* without mastering the rules, strategies, customs, and courtesies which define the world of the handball court,” and I discussed “the roles required in the play world of tennis,” and how those differed from roles in other play worlds. Clearly, the evolution from play education to Sport Education was but a small step. I have tried to maintain this cultural emphasis, the link between play and sport, in most of what I have written about Sport Education.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, my doctoral students and I began a series of studies on teacher effectiveness and supervision, for which we spent endless hours observing physical education classes. It was through these experiences that I came to believe that many physical education programs, even when taught effectively, were not interesting or challenging enough to inspire students. In retrospect, what I began to see, although I did not define it as such at the time, was that the strategies necessary for teachers to provide truly important physical education experiences for their students lie at the nexus of effective teaching practices and imaginative curricula.

In 1982 I was invited to deliver a keynote address at the Commonwealth Games Conference in Brisbane, Australia (Siedentop, 1982). It was here that I first

argued that sport could be viewed as the subject matter of physical education, and it was here that the idea of Sport Education was first revealed. The connection from play education can be seen in the opening paragraph of that address:

The first assumption is that sport, properly understood, properly conceptualized, and properly implemented is a form of play; that is, sport derives its essential meaning from play and its clear importance in human affairs is attributable to its origins in play.

I also made it clear that I justified Sport Education primarily on the basis of its contributions to a more humane and worthy culture:

The second assumption on which this sport education model is based is that a society in which higher forms of ludic activity are pursued vigorously by all the people is a more mature society; that is, a mature sport culture represents an evolution of culture toward a more meaningful form.

In the summer of 1983 I conducted a workshop at Ohio State on the "Sport Education Curriculum and Instruction Model." It was in that workshop, with a mixture of practitioners and doctoral students, that I first presented the format, features, and pedagogy of Sport Education. One of the students was a local elementary physical education specialist, Chris Bell, who took the workshop model and implemented it in her classes that fall, our first true field test. Chris rightfully deserves the designation as the first Sport Education practitioner. Fortuitously, she chose gymnastics and soccer as her first two seasons, and we learned immediately the interesting variations that could be done with different sports.

It was in her gymnastics season, when students were practicing in teams for their initial competition, a floor exercise routine, that we first saw the power of the model to motivate students to learn and practice. Children asked Chris for more time to practice the routines they were creating for the floor exercise competition. Chris told them that she would open the gym 45 minutes prior to school for 2 days a week and that attendance was strictly voluntary. Of the four 5th and 6th grade classes that were doing Sport Education, more than 70 students took advantage of the extra practice time. The culminating gymnastics competitions were videotaped, originally for purposes of assessment. But when children asked to take the tapes home, we quickly discovered the power it had to allow children who were excited about their physical education experience to share the excitement in a tangible way with their families.

In 1985 I first presented the practical application of the model at the Adelphi AIESEP World Congress (Siedentop, 1987). I was more than a little anxious about this presentation because it wasn't the norm in scholarly AIESEP papers to have the main focus be slides of children in action. Still I plunged ahead, and when I finished, the first response from the floor wasn't a question but rather a comment from a well-known American physical educator. He suggested that this was just "throwing out the ball" and represented all we had tried to move away from in recent years. I was flabbergasted that someone could have so badly misunderstood what Sport Education was about. Still, other reactions were more positive, and at least I had made the first step in moving from the developmental stages in central Ohio to a wider audience.

In 1986 I did a Sport Education workshop at the University of Wyoming, benefiting tremendously from a week of intensive work with talented practitioners.

Sadly, given the decentralized nature of American education systems, I had little opportunity to follow-up and see the results of the work, although I have learned across the years that some very good things happened in Wyoming schools after the workshop. During the same year, the model was included as an alternative curriculum model in *Physical Education: Teaching and Curriculum Strategies for Grades 5–12* (Siedentop, Mand, & Taggart, 1986), giving the model its first national exposure over the next few years.

Between 1986 and 1990 I did 10 Sport Education workshops at state and regional conferences, again getting a great reception from practitioners but being unable to follow-up to see results. At OSU, I was still committed to my programmatic research on teacher effectiveness, so that none of our dissertations, theses, or faculty studies examined the effects of Sport Education. Thus the evidence in support of the model was, at that time, totally anecdotal.

The turning point for Sport Education came in 1990 when Bevan Grant, from the University of Otago in New Zealand, applied for a grant from the Hillary Commission to support a national trial of Sport Education in the 10th grade in New Zealand high schools. The trial, headed by Bevan and Peter Sharp of the Hillary Commission, was a clear success (Grant, 1992), even though many teachers who took part in the study were reluctant about participation and not optimistic about the potential of the model.

The students liked it. The teachers recognized the gains being made by students and also valued the manner in which students took responsibility for their own sport participation, freeing the teacher from typical managing duties and allowing him or her to interact with students more around the substantive issues of the season (Grant, 1992). The Hillary Commission then produced wonderfully teacher-friendly Sport Education materials (Grant, Sharp, & Siedentop, 1992) and added staff to meet the demand from teachers who had learned about the model and wanted to implement it in their own school. Peter informed me just last week that 214 high schools in New Zealand are now using the model, and the Hillary Commission is exploring its use in the middle-school grades.

The New Zealand trial was followed quickly by a state-level trial in high schools in Western Australia, under the leadership of Andrew Taggart and Ken Alexander, as one project of the Sport and Physical Education Research Centre (SPARC) (Alexander, 1994). The trial was sufficiently successful that SPARC was funded to do a national trial, and, like the New Zealand trial, evidence was collected from teachers and students that began to produce a more empirical record of Sport Education outcomes. The Australian projects gave birth to the Sport Education in Physical Education Project (SEPEP), which produced highly effective teacher materials and provoked the beginnings of a genuine research base for the model (Alexander, Taggart, & Luckman, 1998; Alexander, Taggart, & Thorpe, 1997; Carlson, 1995; Carlson & Hastie, 1997; Curnow & Macdonald, 1995; Hastie, 1996).

In 1993 I organized university and practitioner colleagues to present a Sport Education symposium at the AAHPERD national convention in Washington, D.C. This was followed the next year with the publication of *Sport Education: Quality PE Through Positive Sport Experiences* (Siedentop, 1994), a book primarily by teachers and for teachers. The model had become much better known and a variety of materials to help teachers implement Sport Education is now available worldwide.

In 1995 in Perth, Western Australia, a national Sport Education conference

was held, and in the same year the entire summer issue of the *ACHPER Healthy Lifestyles Journal* was devoted to Sport Education in Australian physical education. A two-part series on Sport Education was published in *JOPERD* in 1998. AIESEP then came again to Adelphi and offered me the opportunity to do this retrospective. In November of 1998, a Sport Education conference is being organized at Loughborough University in England which will provide the opportunity to explore how Sport Education might be utilized in community sport, as well as in British schools.

Sport Education is now teacher-tested throughout the world. There are many variations as teachers add their own unique applications. More than 50 Sport Education articles have been published in the 1990s, an increasing portion of which are research studies, most of which report results that are more similar than different. Teachers and students like Sport Education. Lower-skilled and typically nonparticipating students seem to gain particularly important benefits. Teachers report that students do become better games players than in traditional approaches. As students become excited about Sport Education, so too do their teachers. Students enjoy the multiple roles and they particularly seem to like learning from their peers.

In my local area, the Grades 5–12 school physical education program at the Columbus School for Girls has been redefined in the Sport Education model. Students are excited. At the “parents’ night” last spring, the physical education staff, who typically spend that evening alone or dealing with a few parents who have complaints, were deluged by parents who wanted to express their thanks about the great learning experiences their daughters were having in physical education, and to learn more about the model. One of our master’s students is completing a thesis that will document the transition to the Sport Education model at that school.

### **The Theoretical and Practical Connections**

Sport Education is rooted in play theory, which emphasizes the cultural perspective rather than psychological or instructional perspectives. The pedagogical features of Sport Education were developed more from my views of quality sport experiences than from instructional theory or the literature on effective pedagogical practices. In the early 1980s, when Sport Education was being developed, I knew a fair bit about the literature on cooperative learning, but I didn’t really draw on it for Sport Education. It has become clear that what happens through Sport Education is consistent with a number of theoretical and instructional movements that have emerged since I first began to work on the model. Or, perhaps I didn’t know about them when the model was being developed.

Certainly there are elements of cooperative learning in Sport Education, especially the group work on teams, yet with individuals still held accountable. The use of persisting groups (teams) is one of the model’s most important features, but I was not then aware of the substantial research literature from other fields that demonstrates the power of persisting groups to improve educational outcomes (Wynne & Walberg, 1994). Student work is done in teams. Teams, of course, are “small groups.” I have recently become aware of the work on the efficacy of small, heterogeneous learning groups, most brilliantly articulated by Elizabeth Cohen (1994a) in *Designing Groupwork: Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom*, an approach that has a strong research base (Cohen, 1994b). A major feature of

Sport Education is students learning from their peers in the context of their team affiliation, which is also an example of “peer tutoring,” another potent instructional practice with an impressive research base.

I have long been influenced by the “teaching games for understanding” work of Len Almond and Rod Thorpe. Sport Education obviously emphasizes tactical awareness and capacity much more than it does isolated skill development; thus the two approaches have much in common. Indeed, there is a wonderful blending of the two models in Len’s recent chapter on “Sport Education in Schools” (Almond, 1997). When the outcomes-based education movement and authentic assessment got to be big news in the late 1980s, it was immediately clear that Sport Education was a very good example of authentic education (Siedentop, 1996). A reduced curriculum, studied more in depth, with outcomes that have meaning in the real world and with assessment that was integral to those outcomes, were all features of authentic education that were already in place in Sport Education. Indeed, it was striking to read the literature on authentic education and see sport used as the main metaphor for explaining what authentic education was all about.

More recently, Kirk and Macdonald (1998) have argued that Sport Education is a good example of situated learning, and Alexander, Taggart, and Luckman (1998) have described “student-centered learning” as a major feature of SEPEP. Both of these help to situate Sport Education nicely in the current *zeitgeist* of curriculum and instruction theory, dominated as it is today by constructivist theory. I am pleased that the model seems to fit well with all these perspectives, but I must also say that Sport Education is not an application of any of them to sport. The model is, and always has been, rooted in sport and play. The pedagogical features are drawn mainly from sport experiences, and also from the classroom management part of early teacher effectiveness literature.

The fact that we know a great deal more now about group work and situated learning helps to explain why the model works. These many approaches share some common elements with Sport Education, as all are thought to enhance student learning and student attitudes. It also suggests, however, that persons interested in effective education might do well to study why well-done team-sport experiences seem to have such powerful effects on those who experience them.

## Variants

Variations of Sport Education will occur. Some will extend the model in positive directions, for example, the addition of the “trainer” role that a teacher in Rotorura, New Zealand, added so that students could learn about the likely injuries that occur in a sport and the treatment and rehabilitation of these injuries. Other applications of Sport Education will miss the boat rather badly. There will be times when the model just doesn’t seem to work in a particular context and we need to find out why it didn’t work. The Curnow and Macdonald (1995) study is a case in point. A teacher tried Sport Education for the first time and wanted to see if it was gender-friendly. She chose an invasion game (not a good idea when entering background differences between boys and girls are so strong) and organized a season that was short by Sport Education standards. As many Antipodean teachers did, she went directly from a teacher-centered model to the student-centered model with no phase-in period. Predictably, the experience did not turn out to be very female-

friendly. Most other studies have found that gender equity is achievable through Sport Education when teachers choose activities wisely and work with students to achieve the gender-friendly goals.

When one develops a curriculum and instruction model, it is futile to worry too much about possible misapplications or, even worse, to get involved in demanding that the model has to be done in some perfect form. That is not how dissemination works in schools. If one gets involved in ownership issues, one is bound to lose. I do believe it is important that teachers have very good, practical materials with which to start Sport Education, and those kinds of materials are now available worldwide from a number of sources.

### **Future Issues**

We have much to learn about how to provide better learning experiences for some of the roles that students occupy in Sport Education. I have seen teachers do a wonderful job of teaching the refereeing role, often having students practice that role as their teammates engage in a tactical drill. In a Sport Education workshop I did several summers ago, students were asked to prepare to discuss how to teach various roles and were given some assignments specific to teaching roles. The discussions on teaching refereeing, scorekeeping, and managing were lively and focused. The discussion on teaching “coaching skills” was much less so. We could use some very practical guidance on how teachers can incorporate leadership development into their Sport Education seasons.

We have much to learn about teaching tactics. I have long been convinced that getting students comfortable “playing the game,” so they can feel in control and know where to go and what to do, is fundamental to their enjoyment and eventual willingness to persevere to develop skillfulness. Our professional literature is long on skill development but very short on tactical development. Recently there has been some good pedagogical literature appearing on tactics and also some assessment models for monitoring student development in tactical play, both of which are important steps forward.

Sport Education applications have only marginally attempted to do the “bridging” activities that link what students learn in Sport Education to the larger sport cultures of the community. In a tennis unit in a New Zealand high school, for example, students spent the last day of the season on a field trip to the local tennis club, learning who goes there, how much it costs, and experiencing the playing of tennis in a club atmosphere. In another high school, at the end of a co-ed rugby season, several teams decided to stay intact and enter a local community sport league. We must do a better job of helping students learn about local sport opportunities, and encourage them and make it easy for them to participate in such activities, and, eventually, to help improve the nature of community sport.

I have been troubled for many years with the tendency among teachers and students to disassociate fun and competence—not only to disassociate them but to imply that striving for competence somehow rules out having fun. Having fun in physical education, for too many students, has come to mean doing something that is typically momentary and trivial. Huizinga (1962), in his classic theory of play, argued that although play was “not serious,” it “absorbed the player intensely and utterly.” Czikszenmihalyi (1975), in his development of the concept of flow, described the merging of action and awareness, that “peculiar dynamic state—the

holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement.” This is a version of “fun” that we need to bring our students into contact with and it clearly involves competence. Research in play and flow suggests it is the experience rather than the outcome that sustains players, and this experience of total involvement may be an important key to helping students develop lifestyle habits that include regular sport participation.

I see an important opportunity for “praxis” through Sport Education. The LEAP project, administered by Russ Pate and colleagues at the School of Public Health at the University of South Carolina, is an intervention program aimed primarily at 9th grade girls with a goal of building healthy physical activity habits. They are using Sport Education for their sport units, but, more important, they are keeping the grouping features of Sport Education for the other aspects of their curriculum (e.g., small, persisting groups). For each unit, students may have a “praxis” team assignment, investigating in the school and local community how women participate, to what extent they might be marginalized, and how access can be improved. This kind of activity is fully consistent with the goal of Sport Education to eventually have a positive impact on sport cultures, as it helps girls to become literate sportswomen, not only having the capacity to critically analyze sport practices but also being willing to do something to change them.

Sport Education has grown in popularity beyond my wildest expectations. To say I’ve had a lot of help along the way is an understatement. The quality of professionals with whom I’ve worked on these projects is exceptional. Teachers, professors, policy-makers, and agency personnel have all had one thing in common; namely, they see in Sport Education a way to better serve children and youth with quality sports experience in the context of physical education. My thanks to them, and to you for coming today.

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